

**DON DELILLO'S "TIME" IN *THE SILENCE*.  
A CORPUS-BASED APPROACH**

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***Abstract:** Stylistically, *The Silence* (2020) does not stray far from most of Don DeLillo's 21st-century novels. As early criticism has noted, the key to decoding this slim volume's significations lies not in its plot, setting, or character, but in theme and, significantly, in its language. By using corpus stylistics' keyword approach, my paper argues in favour of "time" as a thematic binding element between *The Silence* and DeLillo's other 21<sup>st</sup>-century novelistic endeavours. Moreover, the paper explores the ramifications of this theme in the post-technological setting posited by the novel.*

***Keywords:** contemporary American literature, corpus stylistics, Don DeLillo, keyword method, time*

## **1. Introduction**

Since the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Don DeLillo's novels have usually been brief, yet intensively topical writings. Starting with 2001's brief and poetically-infused *The Body Artist*, DeLillo's novelistic output in the last two decades has marked a sudden and unexpected change from the narrative length and intricate thematic layering of his landmark 1997 novel *Underworld*. When questioned about this palpable mutation in his writing, the author himself acknowledged that a paradigm shift had taken place following the events of 9/11 (DeLillo 2005: 90-95). Moving beyond this obvious redrawing of the socio-political map, one can also attribute the condensation of DeLillo's narratives to the swift permutations of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century's cultural landscape, mirrored by remarkable technological strides and the ever-growing sense of interconnectivity, fuelled by the advancement of the Internet. Thus, DeLillo's 21<sup>st</sup> century novels unfold against a backdrop of atomised individuals inhabiting what has become a global digital network, in which each event reverberates across hemispheres and networks, leaving none unaffected.

*The Silence*, published in October 2020, arguably addresses the global network and ceaseless reliance on technology more aptly than DeLillo's other novelistic outputs of the last two decades. Set on Super Bowl Sunday 2022, when a technological blackout wipes out all devices and makes all screens go dark, this short novel concentrates on the coming together of a group of characters, who witness, in their intriguing ways, the end to a historical logic that has become commonplace. Nevertheless, critics have relegated the technological debate to a second-place standing, choosing instead to focus on DeLillo's signature dimension:

the mastery of language and the power of suggestion. As Cornel Bonca (2020) observes while reviewing the novel for *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, the key to decoding the significations of this slim volume lies not in plot, setting or character, but in theme and, significantly, language, which carefully frames a brand of contemporary dread that reduces all to “paralyzed human slivers”.

In fact, language has consistently occupied a prominent position for DeLillo. As the writer himself confessed in a 1997 interview, when probing whether he found academic criticism of his work to be pertinent as to his original intent, “what’s almost never discussed is (...) the language in which a book is framed” (Remnick 1997: 47). Taking this idea forward, upon receiving the Jerusalem Prize in 1999, he viewed the mission of the writer as “working on commas and dashes”, as “before history and politics, there is language. (...) The way an ascetic goes sunward into wilderness, this is how the writer pitches headlong toward language” (DeLillo 1999: 14-17). Language is thus converted into much more than a means-to-an-end for DeLillo: it becomes the very focus of the writer’s endeavour, the centrepiece of his novelistic explorations.

Moreover, what unites DeLillo’s 21<sup>st</sup> century short novels is the exploration of a core set of universal themes, among which none other appears to have been more recurrent than his preoccupation with time. Whether approached in the form of the period required in order to effectively overcome trauma in *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Falling Man* (2007), the possibility of compressing existence into the expanse of a single day in *Cosmopolis* (2003), the deconstruction of chronology as an artistic statement in itself in *Point Omega* (2010), or the reframing of death as a conquerable instance in *Zero K* (2016), time has been a constant theme for DeLillo. Given that “a theme (...) helps the writer deal with the superabundance and profusion of real existence” and “the theme is an element that structures a work in a perceptible way” (Guillén 1993: 192), one may safely consider that the theme of time may be used to unify DeLillo’s works not only on a singular level, but also taken together, as a corpus of texts united by the same stylistic choices, vision, and language.

The publication of *The Silence* raises the issue of integrating this latest novelistic exploration within the larger body of DeLillo’s 21<sup>st</sup> century novels. While ostensibly focused on the experience of the series of characters surprised to find themselves in the midst of a technological blackout, *The Silence* does not stray far from DeLillo’s hallmark approach of evoking recurring themes. Deliberate word choice and the intricate repetition of keywords are elements that have pervaded the author’s literary oeuvre in the past two decades, observable even at the level of a casual reading. In what follows, I shall apply the “key words” method, stemming from corpus stylistics, in order to demonstrate that “time” may serve as a binding element between *The Silence* and DeLillo’s other 21<sup>st</sup> century works, thus signalling the author’s proclivity towards not only certain themes, but to an entire manner of writing.

## 2. Materials and methods - stylistic key(word)s

### 2.1. Corpus stylistics

As a hybrid approach between corpus linguistics and stylistics, corpus stylistics has become part and parcel of the recent development in the digital humanities, with its reliance on software in order to provide raw data from literary

texts, only to be later supplemented by more traditional methods of stylistic analysis. While initially considered a fringe movement, corpus stylistics has benefitted recently from increasing exposure and practice, from explorations of discourse presentation in Early Modern English writing (McIntyre and Walker 2011), to macro-analyses of the fiction of Charles Dickens (Mahlberg 2013). A pertinent overview of the developments in corpus stylistics across the last decade can be found in McIntyre and Walker (2019: 1), who also stress that, despite the numerous possibilities outlined within this emerging field, no clearly-cut definition of it exists yet and the methods employed have not achieved full development.

However, Mahlberg (2007: 221) stresses the capacity of corpus stylistics to move beyond the mere provision of quantitative data and offer a means by which the comparison of a text with a group of texts at the macro level might reveal “tendencies, intertextual relationships, or reflections of social and cultural contexts”, thus “the features that make a text distinctive.” In other words, what corpus stylistics proposes is essentially a two-stage analytical undertaking, as the scrutiny of the corpus serves only as a point of departure, to be necessarily followed by an in-depth analysis of the targeted features in context. Therefore, the most apparent benefit brought about by corpus stylistics is, arguably, the capacity of grounding interpretation in more systematic and rigorous data.

## 2.2. The “key word” (KW) method

Among the potential approaches fleshed out under the dome of corpus stylistics, the “key word” (KW) method offers a pertinent overview of the characteristics of a text in contrast to others and may serve as a primary means towards defining an author’s style at the macro level. What may start on a purely observational basis can be mapped out with more significant precision by using various software suited to corpus stylistics, which may pinpoint the ‘keyness’ of certain terms. For Scott and Tribble (2006: 55-56), “keyness is a quality words may have in a given text or set of texts, suggesting that they are important, they reflect what the text is really about, avoiding trivia and insignificant detail.” Therefore, KWs may be viewed as functional elements that decisively influence the interpretation of a text. They may also be employed at the corpus level to establish thematic and stylistic links to other texts.

As outlined by Scott (2006: 55-59), the main principles behind the KW method, as applied in the case of literature, are predictable and non-ambiguous. The first step presumes to notice the repetition of a word within the text, as frequent repetition is the first indicator of a word’s potential keyness. Secondly, to account for the correct identification of KWs in a ‘node-text’ (the text subjected to analysis), a significantly larger reference corpus must be compiled, which should ideally include tens of thousands of words. Finally, to qualify for keyness, the term in question should appear at least as frequently as a pre-established threshold level. A successful application of this method, used as reference here, is Scott’s (2006) endeavour to identify KWs in *Romeo and Juliet* by using all of Shakespeare’s plays as a reference corpus. This approach was later taken forward by Culpeper (2009), who employed the ‘tagging’ of KWs according to specific semantic domains. Yet, these approaches represent only the initial quantitative step in the larger framework of corpus stylistics, arguably anchored in the interpretation of such data.

### 2.3. Tool: Corpus Query System – Sketch Engine

In order for large-scale corpus analysis to become possible, technology has gradually been developed not only to compile corpora, but also to enhance their querying by as many interested parties as possible. Thus, Corpus Query Systems (CQS) grant the flexibility of searching for keywords, phrases, collocations, grammatical and syntactic patterns and to produce swaths of data according to various criteria. The CQS chosen for this particular analysis is Sketch Engine, whose first version dates back to 2004; in the words of its creators, it “allows the user to view word sketches, thesaurally similar words and ‘sketch differences’, as well as the more familiar CQS functions” (Kilgarriff et al. 2004). In the years since its launch, this online software has been constantly expanded to allow users to produce wordlists, view concordance, generate keywords, and compile their own corpora, which can be compared against each other or to preloaded corpora (Kilgarriff et al. 2014).

### 2.4. Focus text and reference corpus

For this analysis, a reference corpus containing all six of Don DeLillo’s 21<sup>st</sup> century novels, in the commercially available e-book format, has been compiled using Sketch Engine. The basic datasets of this corpus can be found in the following table:

Title	Tokens	Words	%
<i>The Body Artist</i> (2001)	30.727	~ 25.522	10.3
<i>Cosmopolis</i> (2003)	58.833	~ 48.868	19.7
<i>Falling Man</i> (2007)	80.353	~ 66.743	26.9
<i>Point Omega</i> (2010)	31.894	~ 26.492	10.7
<i>Zero K</i> (2016)	78.569	~ 65.261	26.3
<i>The Silence</i> (2020)	18.200	~ 15.177	6.1
Total	298.576	~ 248.007	100

**Table 1.** Reference corpus

For clarifying purposes, a token is considered the minimal unit of a corpus, containing both words and nonwords, which explains why the number of tokens will always be higher than the number of words; spaces are not counted as tokens.

Out of the reference corpus, two subcorpora have been compiled: a focus corpus with the text of DeLillo’s *The Silence* (18.200 tokens, ~15.117 words, 6.1% of the reference corpus) and a reference subcorpus compiled from the remaining five of DeLillo’s 21<sup>st</sup>-century novels (280.376 tokens, ~ 232.889 words, 93.9% of the reference corpus). The need for two separate subcorpora is obvious: if one were to simply compare the text of *The Silence* to the rest of the reference corpus, the results would not accurately reveal the extent to which the frequency of keywords found in the focus corpus may be compatible with that of the reference corpus, as the latter would also contain as an integral part the entire extent of the former.

Subsequently, “time” has been used as lemma to query the two subcorpora alongside each other. The lemma is the base form of the word, as encountered in

dictionaries; the wordlist generated based on the lemma in Sketch Engine enables one to also encounter compounds which include the lemma (e.g. “halftime”, “spacetime”, “daytime” etc.), which may prove useful in a larger linguistic analysis of the text. For the purposes of this study, however, only the results containing the lemma “time” in its base form (singular and plural) will be discussed, while compounds will be disregarded.

### 3. Results

The querying of the two subcorpora using the lemma “time” has yielded the following results:

Lemma	Frequency		Frequency per million		Novel frequency	
	Focus	Reference	Focus	Reference	Focus	Reference
“Time”	63	833	3,461.5	2,971	1	5

**Table 2.** Frequency of the lemma “time”

Of the 63 occurrences found, fifteen have been chosen as part of a conscious sampling decision on a contextual basis, listed in the order in which they appear in the novel:

#	Sentence
1	<b>Time</b> to destination three thirty-four.
2	'The beautiful and airy concepts of space and <b>time</b> .'
3	'Space and <b>time</b> ,' she said.
4	Or is it the blank screen, is it a negative impulse that provoked his imagination, the sense that the game is happening somewhere in Deep Space outside the fragile reach of our current awareness, in some transrational warp that belongs to Martin's <b>time</b> frame, not ours.
5	People begin to appear in the streets, warily at first and then in a spirit of release, walking, looking, wondering, women and men, an incidental cluster of adolescents, all escorting each other through the mass insomnia of this inconceivable <b>time</b> .
6	The way in which <b>time</b> has seemingly jumped forward.
7	Has <b>time</b> leaped forward, as our young man says, or has it collapsed?
8	In other <b>times</b> , more or less ordinary, there are always people staring into their phones, morning, noon, night, middle of the sidewalk, oblivious to everyone hurrying past, engrossed, mesmerized, consumed by the device, or walking toward him and then veering away, but they can't do it now, all the digital addicts, phones shut down, everything down down down.
9	In the dwindling spirit of this astonishing <b>time</b> , she isn't surprised.
10	When we're finished with all this, it may be <b>time</b> for me to embrace a free death.
11	Losing track of <b>time</b> .
12	The physics of <b>time</b> .
13	Absolute <b>time</b> .
14	<b>Time</b> 's arrow.
15	The words carry me back into dead <b>time</b> .

**Table 3.** Representative instances of “time” (DeLillo 2020)

#### 4. Discussion

As concerns the employment of the lemma “time”, one may notice from the onset that it appears in all of DeLillo’s 21<sup>st</sup> century novels with notable frequency. This demonstrates that “time” has been a consistent preoccupation for Don DeLillo throughout his recent novelistic output and may be considered an umbrella theme for many other instances derived from it, such as the deconstruction of time and chronology in *Point Omega* or post-traumatic time in *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*. In *The Silence*, DeLillo arguably proposes a macro-contextualization of the role of time within a technology-dependent society, suddenly thrown into the blankness and timelessness of a technological blackout, in which previously entrenched digital connections are abruptly terminated.

Specifically, while the focus subcorpus has a higher frequency per million of the lemma “time” (3,461.5) than that of the reference subcorpus (2,971), this is not necessarily a significant difference, but rather proof that *The Silence* is consistent with DeLillo’s post-2001 novelistic output concerning the author’s preoccupation with “time”. Indeed, the larger presence of this particular lemma in *The Silence* may be derived, at least in part, from the fact that the novel’s first chapter takes place in an airplane, on a flight from Paris to New York, where one of the characters, Jim Kripps, is fascinated by the aircraft’s small screens tracking the progress of the flight; he makes a habit of reading the data on these screens to his wife, Teresa Berens: “Time in New York twelve fifty-five. (...) Arrival time sixteen thirty-two (...) Time to destination three thirty-four” (#1) (DeLillo 2020: 4), which betrays a fascination not only with technology, but also with the ways in which flight tracking mechanisms manage to incessantly keep track of time. Given the technological blackout which will render these screens blank, cripple the plane’s apparatuses and compel it to crash-land later on, these employments of the lemma “time” suggest, from the novel’s onset, the pivotal role of this theme in the entire novel.

On another level, the highly significant nature of “time” can be grasped from the adjectives used to individualize the various occurrences of this noun. Thus, in the representative samples selected for analysis, “time” is described as “inconceivable” (#5), “astonishing” (#9), “absolute” (#13), and “dead” (#15). Two aspects are striking about these labels. Firstly, their meaning already presumes a superlative dimension or, in the case of #15, degrees of comparison are not prescriptively used; this not only reveals different facets of time, but also yields further significance to this theme within the entire span of the novel. Secondly, there is a stark contrast between instance #15 and the other aforementioned adjectives; this may be explained through the fact that instance #15 occurs in the final pages of the novel, when the characters begin to accustom themselves to the extensive and perhaps permanent nature of the blackout, which effectively proclaims the end of a time; whether this automatically means the beginning of another is largely left open to question. However, it is perhaps not surprising that instance #15 comes from the perspective of Teresa Berens, a poet, the only character in the novel who is a writer, who reminisces about the notebooks she had written and which may now serve as a living archive: “Ideas, memories, words, one notebook after another, a huge number (...) it amazes me to read what I thought was worth writing. The words carry me back into dead time” (DeLillo 2020: 112). Thus, memories written on paper can make a “dead time” come alive, even when digital memories have been wiped out.

The connection between death and time is a pivotal one across DeLillo's works, especially those published since 2001. *The Body Artist* (2001) posited a post-traumatic time, which revealed a proclivity towards artistic creation in the midst of overcoming the loss of a loved one; in *Point Omega* (2010), the deconstruction of time offered valuable insight into minute aspects of existence, coupled with palpable and repetitive depictions of death, first through film running at two frames per second (the ekphrastic representation of Douglas Gordon's real-life art installation *24 Hour Psycho*) and later through the characters' seclusion in the desert, where the connection between time and death is continuously foregrounded: "Time falling away. That's what I feel here (...). Time becoming slowly older. Enormously old. Not day by day. This is deep time, epochal time" (DeLillo 2010: 72); *Zero K* (2016) is centred around one of the character's endeavours of conquering death through cryopreservation, effectively stripping away the boundaries of time that govern human existence. *The Silence* is no different, in that Teresa Berens speaks of the "dead time" of memories (#15), and Martin Dekker, a former physics student obsessed with Einstein's *1912 Manuscript on the Special Theory of Relativity*, a fellow guest at the Super Bowl watch party hosted by Max Stenner and Diane Lucas, tries to comprehend the moment of the blackout as a threshold towards the ultimate stage of existence: "When we're finished with all this, it may be time for me to embrace a free death. *Freitod*" (#10) (DeLillo 2020: 102). Both of these views reinforce the fundamental connection between death and time, made significantly more revealing in light of the blackout. In fact, one may argue that the technological death surrounding them is a catalyst for intense ruminations on the relative nature of existence and the dependency manifested by humanity on technology.

Finally, the notions of time shifts, and time frames represent key instances in DeLillo's exploration of the connection between time, space, and technology in *The Silence*. Martin Dekker pinpoints the origin of these explorations in a quote from Einstein's *1912 Manuscript*: "The beautiful and airy concepts of space and time" (#2) (DeLillo 2020: 29), a connection reinforced by Diane Lucas, his former physics teacher (#3). At a later point, when the characters internalize the glitch in the global network, impressions of a different time begin to take hold of the characters: Diane Lucas perceives different time frames and divergent flows of time between herself and those around her (#4, #12, #13, #14), Martin Dekker talks about a different temporal perception following the blackout, in the form of time 'jumping forward' (#6, #7), and Max Stenner faces challenges comprehending the new time frame he now inhabits, in which the devices that governed people's existence as they walked down the street have been reduced to blank screens (#8). Thus, through the careful framing of language and the attribution of these lines to most of the novel's characters, DeLillo reveals that one of the dominating discussions in the aftermath of a potential future blackout will indeed revolve around the role of time in a post-technological world.

## 5. Conclusion

While these explorations are limited both in scope and dimension (the nature of the two corpora under discussion and the focus of the interpretation in a single direction, on a single theme or KW), they still manage to reveal not only the essential role played by the theme of time in DeLillo's latest novel, but also how this particular theme acts as a bridging element between *The Silence* and the author's previous novelistic creations. It is hoped that this analysis may pave the

way for future corpus-based explorations on other key themes in DeLillo's 21<sup>st</sup> century novels (such as spatiality or death), for extensions in both focus and reference corpora at the level of the author's entire literary output, or for the application of the KW method on works pertaining to other contemporary authors, which might showcase thematic bindings between various works across a partial or complete literary trajectory.

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