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# American Ordinarity Hidden Behind the Spectacle of Digital Technologies: An Analysis of Sports Symbolism in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*

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## Introduction

In February 2020, just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Don DeLillo published a new novel, *The Silence* (henceforth, *TS*). Set on Super Bowl Sunday in 2022, it describes a disaster of an unknown cause in which all electrical connections suddenly become unavailable. “We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information,” says Alfonse Stompanato in another DeLillo novel, *White Noise* (77). Alfonse is actually talking about why people are fascinated with video images of natural disasters, but his words are suggestive of the living conditions of the characters in *TS*. In the novel, forcibly detached from “the incessant bombardment of information,” people become disoriented as we were during the lockdown due to the pandemic, which deprived us of the human connectivity that we had long taken for granted. Moreover, the novel reveals the people’s inability to handle “the bombardment of *no-information*” by elaborately describing their thoughts in such catastrophic circumstances.

In short, *TS* describes the lives of people who are made to deal with the unprecedented situation, which seems to belong to “that side of the reality.” With this in mind, this paper tries to elucidate DeLillo’s rhetoric on how the characters in the novel attempt to seek American ordinarity while they are bereft of the benefits of digital technologies. Among the several factors in the novel, this paper pays special attention to the novel’s setting on Super Bowl Sunday, when the TV broadcast of the game suddenly halts because of a power failure, to explore possible reasons for the choice of Super Bowl Sunday as the setting.

As a matter of fact, when asked by Ailsa Chang the reason for choosing Super Bowl Sunday as a setting, DeLillo answered as follows: “Well, it’s an event that draws people—not just in this country but elsewhere. It’s more than a football game.... It’s a kind of nearly universal pastime.” As DeLillo’s simple answer suggests, the Super Bowl can be seen as a suitable medium for describing the novel’s imaginary world where a large number of people are simultaneously affected by a power failure and lose contact with the Internet.

Nevertheless, if he only wanted to focus on the world impact of American spectator sports, he could have chosen the World Series instead.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is speculated that the reason for choosing this date and this game was not as simple as he stated in the interview, and there seem to be several reasons for his view that American football is more suitable than baseball for this speculative novel.

In an attempt to shed light on this topic, this paper explores the roles that American football plays in *TS* by comparing it with baseball. In so doing, this paper aims to demonstrate how DeLillo rhetorically uses sports symbolisms in the novel that describes people’s behavior when they are deprived of American ordinarity.

## Super Bowl Sunday as a Single Irreplaceable Spectacle

This section firstly discusses the significance of DeLillo’s choice of Super Bowl Sunday as the novel’s setting. To begin with, the following paragraphs cite several factors that explain why its possible alternative, the World Series, is incompatible with the themes of the novel.

In the first place, although Stephen Partridge and Timothy Morris praise DeLillo’s use of baseball in *Underworld*, stating that “DeLillo clearly works against some of baseball fiction’s clichés” (30), DeLillo hardly mentions the sport in his twenty-first-century novels, including in *TS*. DeLillo might have regarded baseball as an unsuitable medium for describing the current state of the United States, where the ideal of democracy is in jeopardy, because baseball has long been considered the embodiment of democracy.

It is also necessary to note that baseball’s status in American culture has somehow changed and

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1 Obviously, the World Series is not the only possible alternative. For example, the World Cup may also be a substitute for the Super Bowl. In fact, in the novel, one of the characters, Martin, talks about the World Cup: “What kept me completely engaged in the events on my TV screen was the World Cup” (24). However, another character, Max, expresses his dislike for soccer, saying, “What kind of sport is it where you can’t use your hands? . . . It’s like self-repression of the normal impulse” (25). As Max’s statements suggest, the halt of a World Cup game may not mean as much to Americans as that of a Super Bowl game, which could be why DeLillo did not consider the World Cup suitable as the setting of his novel.

that it has lost its popularity over the years. One of the triggers that have bored fans with the game is its time-consuming nature. Conventionally, baseball has been cherished as a “timeless sport,” since its games do not have time limits (van den Heuvel xiii; Yoshida 6). Moreover, ballparks can be considered an oasis in progress-driven, materialistic urban American society, where time management is prioritized. However, recently, due to its timelessness, the popularity of baseball has been declining.<sup>2</sup> It is also because dynamic and exciting plays are not frequent in a game, despite it being relatively long. In short, in the digital era of technological advancement, where sensation and speed are prioritized, baseball’s pastoral image has been left behind.<sup>3</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt once wrote during wartime that “I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going.” He continued: “Baseball provides a recreation which does not last over two hours or two hours and a half, and which can be got for very little cost”—highlighting the sport’s accessibility as a recreation (qtd. in Muder). Such an image of the national pastime is no longer valid in twenty-first-century America and the situation surrounding baseball in the said century is reflected on DeLillo’s choice of sports in his writings.

While baseball is not a suitable medium for describing twenty-first-century America, the characteristics of American football make it more suitable for playing this role. Though this supposition is overly simplistic, we can say that while baseball is democratic, American football’s aim is to conquer territory—an activity similar to war.<sup>4</sup> Plus, American football contains more physical contact than baseball, sometimes even causing death. In addition, one of the characters, Max Stenner, says, “World Wars in Roman numerals, Super Bowls in Roman numerals” (28); thus, the naming of football games, as well as the violent nature in the sport’s playing style, evokes images of war. These close relationships between American football and war are tediously commonplace, but still, they certainly qualify “the football game as a substitute for the looming global warfare” (Sun 967) and resonate with the conspiratorial perspective of Martin Dekker, a physics teacher at a charter school in Bronx, of the situation after the blackout: “Nobody wants to call it World War III but this is what it is” (79). As the novel vividly describes, once the substitute form of war becomes inaccessible, people become beset with doubts and fears as to whether they are actually involved in a real war.

Besides, although the Super Bowl is held in a geometric rectangular field, baseball is played in a pastoral image of a ballpark. Paul Goldberger explains what ballpark means in American culture:

there is also something inherent in the design of the baseball park itself that spans the tension between rural and urban, the two realms of American culture that often coexist uncomfortably.... For the game to succeed, the two worlds have to work in harmony. (xiii)

While a ballpark is the representation of harmony, or balance, an American football field is not concerned with creating harmony or maintaining an ideal balance. Rather, football pursues the expansion of one’s territory, reminiscent of the Westward Movement. In a sense, DeLillo’s depiction of an imaginary America in *TS* is equivalent to that of the aftermath that America’s reckless expansion in technological advancement might bring about. In fact, DeLillo, when asked his motive for writing this novel, said the following:

The question is, does it [technology] enrich our lives? Yes, in many, many ways it does, of course. But are there certain drawbacks? Do people get to depend on it too heavily? And then there are those who use technology to create certain kinds of chaos and panic and violence and cause deep grief. (Chang)

It can be said that the novel describes a world in which the ideal balance between humanity and technological advancement has been lost. If the field of American football is a metaphor for America’s expansion, the halt of the Super Bowl TV broadcast as well as the unavailability of any online connection symbolize the halt of

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2 Fearing the decline of the popularity of the national pastime, recent rule amendments tend to have been related to time management of games. The rule amendment established at the start of the 2023 season obliges pitchers to deliver a pitch within a certain amount of time (based on a pitch clock). Also, to increase the number of stolen bases and lead to more dynamic and exciting plays, the size of the bases has been enlarged (Castrovince).

3 The novel opens with the scene where Jim and Tessa are on a plane from Paris to Newark. Bored with the situation, Jim continues to read aloud time and numbers displayed on the screen in the cabin. During an international flight, people often go beyond the time difference and somehow lose their sense of time. However, paradoxically, people are made conscious of time during a flight, since time is always displayed on the screen. The opening scene with this married couple implies that the notion of timelessness cannot be gained in the twenty-first century.

4 Since the relationship between American football and war was already introduced in his second novel *End Zone*, such an association is no longer striking. In *TS*, Max, mentioning military jets flying over the stadium on Super Bowl Sunday, is critical about such an obsolete connection, saying, “We’ve gone beyond all comparisons between football and war” (28).

America's reckless technological advancement, at which point people reconsider whether their expansive dependence on digital technologies has enriched their lives.

Dwight Garner, on the other hand, presents another interpretation for the football game, saying that it "is a forum for DeLillo to approach a familiar topic: the vagaries of mass consumption." The Super Bowl is not merely a media event that draws spectators both to the stadium and in front of television screens but it also stimulates people's desire to consume. Joseph L. Price points out the following:

Fans, in fact, spend more money on the Super Bowl—making a pilgrimage to the game; attending parties bedecked with official Super Bowl paraphernalia; placing bets and entering office pools—than Americans spend on traditional religious practices and institutions throughout the entire month. ("An American Apotheosis" 215)

In addition, it is worth mentioning that the Super Bowl is held in winter, unlike the World Series held in fall. People usually require energy in winter for lighting and heating, so it can be said that Super Bowl Sunday occurs in the season when people need to enjoy the benefits of technology to make their lives comfortable.

Price also points out that consumption on Super Bowl Sunday explicates how secularized American society has become:

Professional football games are not quite so obviously religious in character. Yet there is a remarkable sense in which the Super Bowl functions as a major religious festival for American culture, for the event signals a convergence of sports, politics, and myth. Like festivals in ancient societies, which made no distinctions regarding the religious, political, and sporting character of certain events, the Super Bowl succeeds in reuniting these now disparate dimensions of social life. ("The Super Bowl" 137)

As he plainly puts it, the Super Bowl is an alternative and secular form of a religious event in modern American society. Moreover, journalist Frank Deford explains that the Sunday game stands in for religious rituals on Sundays:

Throughout American history, going back to Cotton Mather and beyond, Sunday was tightly structured and well defined as a day of peace.... Now, the trip out of the house on Sunday is not to visit a church, but to see a game or to play one.

Therefore, by showing the replacement of a religious event with a sporting or media event, DeLillo makes it explicit how "the Super Bowl has dominated public attention for weeks, and viewers turn their faces to televisions even as prayerful Muslims turn toward Mecca" (Price "The 'Godding Up'" 288).

In short, the Super Bowl—a single and irreplaceable spectacle held on a Sunday in winter—entails various aspects of American culture and various needs. It can be said that these attributes are proof that DeLillo thoughtfully chose the Super Bowl rather than the World Series; given that the World Series involves several games in fall, the football game can be considered more suited to describing one specific night in DeLillo's imaginary and dystopian America. As this section has demonstrated, in addition to DeLillo's simple answer in the interview, the unique factors of American football, in comparison with those of baseball, make the Super Bowl an effective medium in *TS*.

Although the associations with American football are factors that make the depiction of the world more meaningful, it still seems that DeLillo's main concern in *TS* is not so much which sport to introduce as what people's reactions will be like when they are deprived of the sporting event that they take for granted. With this in mind, the following section discusses how the characters react when they face a situation wherein they cannot access information from the Internet and sporting events.

### **In Pursuit of American Ordinarity**

Although Super Bowl Sunday can be regarded as an alternative form of a religious Sunday, the viewers of TV broadcasts in the novel are not necessarily fervent followers of football. Rather, they are actually fervent followers of a media event, staying in front of a TV screen without contemplation. The novel describes this well.

In the first place, although the five characters in *TS* are going to gather at Max's apartment in Manhattan to watch the Super Bowl together, they show no intention of watching the whole game. During their flight back to Newark, on their way to Max's apartment, the married couple Jim Cripps and Tessa Berens think that "[w]e don't have to see every minute of the game" (15). For them, the Super Bowl is not a solid

cause for the gathering; it is merely a pretext, and they do not intend to enjoy the game for the sake of the sport.

Similarly, the host, Max, is not interested in the sport itself. Although he is the only person who gets frustrated when the TV broadcast of the game has stopped because of the blackout, his frustration is aroused not because he cannot watch the game but because he is worried about the money he has bet on it (19). In short, Max is not pursuing the enjoyment of the sport; rather, he pursues enjoyment through gambling—that is, his prospect of wealth.

As a result, after the TV broadcast is halted, they soon stop thinking about the sport, “despite the physical proximity brought about by a fake common interest” (Sun 974). Instead, they find themselves incapable of handling the world without a TV broadcast and Internet connection.

Deprived of their ordinary lives, people in the world are made to think about the notion of home, whether they like it or not. A nurse at the clinic that Jim and Tessa visit after their crash-landing thinks about the preciousness of home after she faces an unknown situation:

“The more advanced, the more vulnerable. Our systems of surveillance, our facial recognition devices, our imagery resolution. How do we know who we are? We know it’s getting cold in here. What happens when we have to leave? No light, no heat. Going home, living where I live, . . . if the subways and buses are not running, if the taxis are gone, elevator in the building immobilized, and if, and if, and if. I love my cubicle but I don’t want to die here.” (61–62)

Her remarks suggest how the simple act of going home can be cut short by the blackout of technology. Also, her repetition of “and if” reflects how technology dependent we are. Meanwhile, she mentions that the temperature is getting low, which makes explicit her worry about the potential inaccessibility of energy resources and heating technologies. As she points out, despite the benefits of technological advancement, our society is so fragile that we are unable to return home once we lose connection with technology. Eventually, she is even made to think about her death.

The nurse in the clinic is not the only one who worries about the uncertainty of the current situation. In Max’s Manhattan apartment, Jim also thinks about home, saying, “Home . . . Where is that?” (97). Thus, DeLillo’s near dystopian world, or the world of “semi-darkness” (65), is the place where people lose their sense of security wherever they are, even when they are under a roof.

As well as losing the sense of home, this novel reflects on “the degradation of language revealed by the failure of digital technology” (Watanabe 15; my trans). When talking about the novel, DeLillo mentions the following: “The fact that power has failed, that their powers of communication have also failed to a certain extent. They are stranded, and that affects the way they address each other and the way they think” (Chang). Once they have lost their common topic of conversation, namely the Super Bowl, their utterances “vanish into the void” (Watanabe 16; my trans), and “conversation is peppered with scientific and pseudoscientific jargon, and the characters often seem to be working through the routine of an experimental mime show” (Trela).

Hearing Martin speaking confidently about the indescribable situation, Diane, Max’s wife, thinks of his state as follows: “This is Martin’s version of Albert Einstein speaking English” (82). While Martin keeps talking, citing the words from an Einstein’s manuscript, Diane does not think he is speaking with his own words; rather, he is now a reincarnation of his respected scientist, whose words seem not so much practical as apparitional.

Similarly, Max makes up live broadcast of an imaginary Super Bowl game, caused by “a strange compulsion to circumvent the void brought about by the shutdown” (Sun 963). This can also be regarded as a reflection of the degradation of his communication strategy in an extraordinary event. Although Max keeps speaking eloquently from his imagination, his utterances are not directed to anyone, and no one is earnestly listening to him in return. Also, Max’s word choice reveals how his vocabulary is dependent on the vocabulary from the media, as Jena Sun points out that “Max’s professional-level made-up broadcast fully illustrates how jargon has found its way into daily speech through media saturation” (970). Because of this, even in a state of emergency, Max has to rely on the words from TV. To sum up, his word choice reveals not only how much media seeps into American consciousness but also how difficult it is for him to communicate without using media-saturated jargon.

As Anne Enright explains, “This mimicry is all that remains of the heroic sporting sequences of DeLillo’s *Underworld* and *End Zone*. The great game is reduced to something unseen. . . . Max falls silent, drinks whisky, leaves and, when he comes back, he will not say what things he has witnessed outside.” Although Max decides to leave the house to see what is happening outside, as Enright points out, he does not report what he has seen outside when he returns home. This suggests that he does not have appropriate and

effective words to describe the situation.

While the characters' language and communication skills are degraded because of the blackout, they still make efforts to go back to the American ordinariness they have known before. For one thing, it is still the power of language that matters in overcoming the "ruins of techno-dystopia" (Watanabe 14; my trans), and it is not sport nor media but language that will help revitalize humanity. Katsuaki Watanabe argues that Tessa is a key person in the revitalization of humanity because she is an analog poet who does not rely on the help of digital technologies but writes her poems on her notebook (20). Sun also makes a similar point:

Tessa's devotion to the written words as a lonesome pursuit and at once a highly private activity, harks back to his [DeLillo's] somewhat pessimistic view on literature's declining impact... By having Tessa avail herself of language to keep things in perspective and to act autonomously, at least, as an individual, DeLillo announces his great fondness for the written words. (979)

Unlike Max's monologue, filled with jargon from sports and commercialism, Tessa's attempt to create a poem out of the situation with her own words can be regarded as finding solace in this dystopian environment.

Also, Tessa's image of home is more concrete and quotidian:

In the bedroom Tessa thinks about going home, being home, the place, finally, where they don't see each other, walk past each other, say *what* when the other speaks, aware only of a familiar shape making noise somewhere nearby. (96)

Her thoughts of home contrast with others' such thoughts; unlike the nurse in the clinic, who worries about getting home without technology, Tessa's imagining of home evokes the feeling of ordinary human life. Although other characters are too preoccupied with the disconnection of the network, her autonomous thinking reminds us of the possibility of human connections and creativity without Internet connectivity.

If Tessa's autonomous and analogous creativity is a key to stabilizing the situation, then Max's made-up broadcast and Martin's eloquent lecture-like monologue can also be interpreted in other ways; Although their utterances are filled with jargon from the media and the scientific domain and are not easy to understand, these men are, in fact, doing their best in an extraordinary situation to regain their sense of ordinariness by using the words they know well.

Here, it is useful to compare Max's made-up broadcast of the Super Bowl game to a scene in the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* where the protagonist, Randle McMurphy, makes up an imaginary World Series game. McMurphy and other patients confined in a psychiatric hospital lead monotonous daily routines designed by the strict Nurse Ratched. McMurphy demands that the nurse let them watch the World Series games on TV, but she refuses, so McMurphy entertains his fellow patients with his made-up broadcast of a baseball game.

Here, both Max and McMurphy try to compensate for the inaccessibility of the TV broadcast of the games by creating imaginary games. McMurphy tries to bring American ordinariness to the mental institution, a place that represents extraordinariness, where it is doubtful whether the patients' freedoms are guaranteed. Similarly, Max tries to bring back American ordinariness in the extraordinary situation by fabricating the imaginary football game. Thus, the intertextuality between *TS* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* suggests that the sporting event functions as a reference point for the life that ordinary Americans enjoy.

In addition to Max's recapitulation of the TV broadcast of the Super Bowl game, including of TV commercials, which is filled with words entrenched in ordinary American life, Martin's citation of the words from Einstein's manuscript is also regarded as his attempt to bring back the ordinariness to an extreme situation, for these scientific words are his home ground. Their use of jargon is not successful in terms of ideal communication, but it is true that they are creating stories that fill the void caused by the blackout, through which they attempt to regain a sense of ordinary life.

In fact, DeLillo often introduces characters who make up baseball games out of their imagination and creativity. Bill Gray in *Mao II*, for example, finds enjoyment in making imaginary announcements of baseball games as a child. Also, in the prologue to *Underworld*, Russ Hodges confesses that "I spent years in a studio doing re-creations of big-league games. The telegraph bug clacking in the background and blabbermouth Hodges inventing ninety-nine percent of the action" (25). Along with these characters, Max also makes up a TV live broadcast of the Super Bowl out of his creativity. Considering these, it can be said that DeLillo suggests in his novels how such a "pure game of making up" (DeLillo *Mao II* 46) can entertain American individuals and even enhance their creativity.

In closing, because this paper's main concern is sports symbolism in *TS*, the following discussion

deals with the significance of the introduction of a man in a baseball cap in this novel. After Jim and Tessa's plane crash-lands, the wounded Jim is taken to a clinic, where he encounters a man in a baseball cap: "In a room down the hall a young man in an oversized tunic and a baseball cap stood on his toes to brush a medication on Jim's wound and then bandage it securely" (63). Although no more description of him is provided, judging from his casual dress, the man seems to be a doctor who was originally off duty but is forced to work due to the emergency.

After Jim arrives at Max's apartment, while describing the things he witnessed on his way, he mentions "the man in the baseball cap bandaging [his] head" (108). Jim's vivid recollection of the doctor in a baseball cap may be due to his casual clothes, since a baseball cap is not part of a formal uniform but of the doctor's ordinary or private life. Thus, the man in a cap can be a form of reassurance for Jim, reminding him of the ordinary American life he has just been deprived of.

In fact, DeLillo confesses in his essay "Man at the Window," included in the Picador edition of the novel *TS*, that he has been wearing the same baseball cap for years (123). For DeLillo, his baseball cap is a symbol of his ordinary life. Similarly, for Jim, a baseball cap may have provided solace in the emergency and functions as a reference point for American ordinary and quotidian life. Therefore, Jim, in pursuit of safe ground during the blackout, cannot help remembering the man in a baseball cap.

Men wearing baseball caps may be so entrenched in American society that people seldom pay special attention to them. However, since Jim is deprived of what Americans take for granted, such as an Internet connection and the Super Bowl, he is made conscious of such trifling American ordinariness. Thus, the man in a baseball cap represents a striking contrast to the spectacular media event. It seems that here lies the reason why DeLillo gets rid of the Super Bowl; by so doing, he tries to foreground the preciousness of ordinary lives hidden behind the media-saturated world. Similarly, although DeLillo does not mention baseball as a sport in *TS*, he still introduces a man in a baseball cap as a symbol for America's ordinariness.

As a matter of fact, it is through baseball that DeLillo confirms whether America has regained ordinariness after the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. He starts the aforementioned essay by saying "[b]aseball, baseball, baseball" (121), and in it, he describes himself constantly switching his eyes from the TV broadcast of a baseball game to people passing along a street outside a window. Although DeLillo makes little mention of baseball in his twenty-first-century novels, his essay shows that he still believes in the sport as a touchstone for American culture. It may be true that baseball's democratic nature has lost its affinity with DeLillo's fictional works published in twenty-first century; however, as DeLillo shows in *TS*, baseball references, no matter how trifling they may appear, are an effective facilitator for showing how Americans feel. In conclusion, DeLillo's use of sports in his novel function as an effective touchstone for examining the reality of American society and enables the description of the complex mental condition of American individuals under an extreme situation.

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