Technology and Cyberspace: Don DeLillo

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Abstract. This paper explores how people respond to technology, in particular to cyberspace. Through various works of Don DeLillo (1936-), the American novelist, this paper argues how our being is threatened in the technological age because information manipulation ability easily makes people harbor the illusion that the world revolves around them, so thus we excessively depend on technology – the illusion that even immortality can be obtained in cyberspace. Our way of thinking also has become a technological one. Extreme dependence on technology creates a kind of cyberspace paranoia. However, there is also hope. In cyberspace, everything is connected. Of course equations to make bombs on computer monitors end up in real bombs, but on the other hand a seraphic word on computer monitors could change the world for the better. If a great many people are connected in cyberspace with strong intentions to achieve peace, our world will become peaceful. Predicting **the nature of such connections** in cyberspace, DeLillo forecasts the arrival of social network services, such as Facebook.

Keywords: Leading-Edge Technology, Cyberspace, Computers, Threats to Human Existence, Hope, Immortality, Interconnectivity, Social Network System, Facebook.

1. Introduction

We have witnessed a remarkable advancement of technology in recent years. Technology continues to evolve, and many people are now enjoying connections via social network systems, exemplified most famously by Facebook. Don DeLillo has cast his piercing vision on such changes in our society and has provided insights into various aspects of our world, ranging from our very being to our language, culture, and technology, and shown us how "People in this world have needs and desires shaped by technology."[1] This paper aims to explore how technology and cyberspace are deeply related to human beings by examining fundamental implications in DeLillo's works.

2. Threat or Hope?

2.1. Our Being in the Technological Age

Late capitalism seems to be stuck in a dead end in many ways now, as seen in the turbulent global economy caused by Lehman's fall and the Greek financial crisis, while technology has continued all the while to make remarkable progress. We must ask, how is technology related to late capitalism? To be sure, "each successive expansion of the capitalist system entails a corresponding technological revolution."[2] Some are already enjoying not only desktop computers, but also iPhone multi-touch cell phones and iPad tablet computers, which can be used for Twitter, Facebook and other social networking services. As long as capitalism continues, we will continue to see such new technologies. It goes without saying that we are now living in a technological age. It is thus intriguing and important to examine how we have been affected by technologies in the latter half of the 20th century.

Don DeLillo elaborately depicts the effects of technology on human behavior and consciousness in late capitalism in *Cosmopolis*,[3] where Eric Packer, the main character, is a business tycoon who has an unrivaled ability to manipulate information. Preoccupied with the analysis of data on computer screens, Eric can detect various patterns hidden in the natural order of things, which makes his transaction successful enough for him to say "we have meaning in the world. People eat and sleep in the shadow of what we do."[4] Ultimately he becomes enveloped in the illusion that the world revolves around him.

What lies behind such an illusion? Eric feels mesmerized because he has obtained the capitalist cyber-mogul's sense of privilege. Some information retrieved from the computer network system is only "a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing . . . because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp."[5] Eric's excellent command of language "for grasping network of power and control" gives him exaggerated confidence that there is no world without him. That is, if we gain immense power in controlling information via the computer network system at our disposal, we tend to embrace the illusion that we are superior to others in this society.

More noteworthy are some risks hidden in technology. Nowadays, e-commerce transactions are commonly carried out in business. *Cosmopolis* also sheds light on what happens with the advent of cyber-capital. It explains that "[t]he more visionary the idea, the more people it leaves behind. This is what the protest is all about. Visions of technology and wealth."[6] Money in electronic form is playing an essential role in dominating and oppressing the average person. There becomes less space for ordinary people in cyber-transactions. Furthermore, cyber-capital helps multinational transactions to easily bring about "a wholeness, a sameness."[7] For example, not only Coca-Cola and McDonald's but also Apple's products are ubiquitous. We can see the actual individual subject engulfed in a society of "a wholeness and a sameness" in the capitalist system. Moreover, "cyber-capital . . . creates the future. Because time is a corporate asset now. It belongs to the market system. The present is hard to find. . . . The future becomes insistent."[8] People are threatened by a fear of the loss of a sense of space, time and being. Therefore, violent demonstrations against capitalism erupt to break out of such a stultifying capitalism and restore their balance.

Another risk is excessive dependence on technology. DeLillo never fails to describe it. Eric trusts computer analysis so much that he rides around in a limousine with leading-edge medical equipment, which provides him with great satisfaction because he sees "a medleys of data on every screen, all the flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing"[9] while his body is connected to such devices. He gains a sense of even physical health and security by checking data on computer monitors not only in his office but also in his limousine. He has indeed become addicted to technology. His close but risky connection to data is clearly attested to by his response to market quotes on the tickers of the tower. When anti-capitalist protesters attack the tower, the market quotes disappear from the ticker, and he suddenly loses his belief in technology. Surprisingly, however, as soon as the tickers begin to work again, he is revitalized. It goes without saying that his personal existence is enormously fragile in that it heavily depends on virtual data on computer screens.

2.2. Desire for Immortality

DeLillo also focuses on our long-cherished desire for immortality and raises the question whether technology could even help us obtain immortality. *White Noise*[10] describes how the main characters, Jack Gladney and his wife Babette, are afraid of death. She drinks Dylar, a kind of elixir of life, which is not extracted from a philosopher's stone but has been invented by a scientific researcher. Dylar, however, does not work for her. Their attempt appears clearly comical and ironical, but DeLillo explores whether advanced science or technology helps us fulfill our long-held dreams of obtaining immortality. In the 21st century, though there are some medicines or medical treatments which are helpful for enhancing longevity, "an elixir of life" has not been invented yet. No one can stop such deeply human efforts directed toward obtaining immortality, no matter how "rational" our world claims to be.

Cosmopolis focuses particularly on immortality in cyber space. Eric is deeply addicted to technology, which gives him the delusion of living for ever. He wants to achieve an existence external to his own body. His idea of immortality in cyber-space is invoked when he talks with his assistant, Kinski, who introduces the following prophecy: "People will not die. . . . People will be absorbed in streams of information. . . . Humans and computers merge. . . . An idea beyond the body."[11] This speculation that humans will become immortal after the merger of computers and humans sounds incredible, but it drives him forward with an

irresistible desire for eternal life. He says that he has "always wanted to become quantum dust, transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat."[12] He fantasizes continually about living for ever in cyberspace.

Where does Eric's firm belief in immortality in cyberspace come from? The idea that immortality can be obtained by uploading one's data into a computer is a fantastic notion based on our desires in various fictions and philosophies. This notion clearly can be derived most directly, however, from the theory of cybernetics introduced by Norbert Wiener,[13] an American mathematician – simply put, the concept that humans and technology can be fused, popular in the late 20th century. According to Wiener, if human functions are saved onto a disk in data format and then uploaded to another device, human functions can be duplicated on the storage device. If this theory can be made to work in Eric's individual case, he can theoretically live forever by converting his body functionality into some sort of pulse data. Considering that DeLillo always keeps the context of culture in mind, it should come as no surprise that he incorporates this theory into his work. Technological advances seem to lead us to the immortal world that humans have been seeking as long as there has been culture.

Even if Eric becomes immortal in a virtual society, however, can we say that his existence is eternal? Ironically, when he is shot by a fired former employee, he sees himself on his high-tech watch screen, even though he is still alive. He exists on the border of immortality and mortality. Instead of feeling a sense of satisfaction, he feels unbearable pain. Such perceived pain makes him understand what his being is. If "body is the authentic space of pain,"[14] he realizes that he cannot live "beyond the body." Hubert Dreyfus, an American philosopher, known for his exegesis of Martin Heidegger, also argues that computers cannot "recognize common perceptual achievements in humans and animals . . . In short . . . computers cannot 'think' because they do not have (lived) bodies."[15] It can also be said more generally that the body is the authentic space of being. Whether he finally gains eternal life on his watch screen, however, is left open ended. Furthermore, Heidegger warns us that "The will to mastery [of technology] becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control,"[16] that is, "For Heidegger the great threat to human existence is that thinking has become a kind of technical information processing."[17] Thus, Eric's desire for gaining immortality is without doubt "the great threat" to his existence as a human being.

The desire for immortality is one of main themes of DeLillo's works. Heidegger also contemplates immortality and reaches the striking conclusion that "life's being is also death. Everything that enters into life also begins to die, to go toward its death, and death is at the same time life."[18] If you accept Heidegger's claims, you will see that an attempt to avoid death by straining for immortality may actually indicate an attempt to avoid being in the world. That is to say, Eric's attempt to escape from mortality indicates that he avoids life's being, and as a result he is surely losing his being as a human person in the world.

2.3. Connected to Everything in Cyberspace

Excess dependence on technology leads us to destruction, as discussed in the first section. DeLillo perceives the threat of computers against our most essential being, saying "The worship of technology ends in the paranoid spaces of the computer net,"[19] citing the case of the Heaven's Gate group and their mass suicide. As seen in such a cult religion, excess dependence on technology also can make us blind, and as a result we cannot view things sensibly. Considering such a situation, to be sure, the spaces of computer networks have a paranoid aspect. This section examines whether cyberspace is paranoid or not, from different perspectives.

In his major novel *Underworld*,[20] DeLillo elaborately describes cyberspace, whose main attribute is borderlessness, since everything is connected. He shows two paranoid aspects which lie deep within the computer net. First, he presents a formidable connection in cyberspace, which is embodied in a scene of explosions of hydrogen bombs in cyber space: "Shot after shot, bomb after bomb, and they are fusion bombs, remember, atoms forcibly combined, and even as they detonate across the screen, again and again."[21] Two or more atomic nuclei are forcibly connected together and become one heavier nucleus. Then they detonate one after another in cyberspace, intensifying the paranoia. Secondly, he shows unique connections between

cyberspace and the physical world of reality. For example, Matt, a younger brother of the main character Nick Shay in *Underworld*, says "how a brief equation that you tentatively enter on your screen might alter the course of many lives, might cause the blood to rush through the body of a woman on a tram many thousands of miles away."[22] Merely imagining something and then writing down the necessary equations on computer screens enables you to see the possibility that it will become reality. Therefore, "Once they imagine the bomb, write down equations," says Viktor Maltsey, an executive of Nick's client's company, "they see it's possible to build, they build, they test in the American desert, they drop on the Japanese, but once they imagine in the beginning, it makes everything true."[23] Entering something into a computer, we will witness it becoming reality. This is epitomized in his words, "All technology refers to the Bomb."[24] Technology is deeply and fatally connected to bombs. In that sense, cyberspace is a terrifying space, where data including equations for producing bombs are input and the simulation of hydrogen bombing is carried out based on data. We cannot ignore this paranoid foundation of cyberspace.

DeLillo, however, also explores another side of computer nets in *Underworld*: human connections and "a belief in renewal."[25] Cyberspace contains every possibility because "Everything is connected in the end. Sister and Brother. A fantasy in cyberspace and a way of seeing the other side and a settling of differences that have less to do with gender than with difference itself, all argument, all conflict programmed out,"[26] that is, "Peace."[27] For instance, after the death of Sister Edgar, a nun who was Matt's strict teacher and a woman who took care of the poor excluded from benefits of consumer culture, she goes not to Heaven but to cyberspace, where she joins Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI. Virtual encounters takes place. It is a kind of connection and a sign that something new happens – possible connections between people in cyberspace, beyond gender differences, racial discrimination, differences in status, and national or regional borders, without any flow of time.

Turning our eyes more closely to the possibility of our connections in cyberspaces, we can see another promising aspect of computers. If you enter "a single seraphic word,"[28] you can see the word "on the monitor, [. . .] replacing the comprehensive text displays that accompany the bombs."[29] In short, if you enter a word, such as "peace," into the computer, there is a possibility that peace will be able to replace paranoia. Here we can see a hope in the future via networks, where we are connected to each other and there will be no conflicts and no discrimination.

Where has the idea of connection between information society and peace led us? Viewing the 21st century from the perspective of connections or communication in cyberspace, we notice that many of us are now enjoying exchanging ideas or opinions via social network systems such as Facebook. We feel we can be connected to anyone, anywhere, anytime, on the net. Since 1960, such developments have been predicted and discussed by numerous sociologists. Among them is Yoneji Masuda, who forecasts that information revolutions will provide ordinary citizens with an opportunity to voluntarily create a new life style and social system.[30] In such a social context, we can see reflections of DeLillo's predictions of the advent of network connections. He spectacularly foresees our close connections in cyberspace and sees a hope there – for world peace.

2.4. Conclusion

Don DeLillo's careful examination of social phenomena, especially about how people suffer profound effects from technology and cyberspace, opens our eyes to fundamental threats we face in late capitalism. With his exposure of our latent vulnerabilities to technology, we have witnessed how excess dependence on technology threatens us, even to the point of making our way of thinking "a kind of technical information processing." Furthermore, his argument about our-long cherished desire for immortality in cyberspace, which is based on the well-known theories advocated by Wiener, raises the question whether an immortal entity in cyberspace can be said to be a human being, even if it were found possible to create one. Finally, through his focus on connections in cyberspace, we have learned of the possibility of making the world peaceful through our own intentions, perhaps even in a single seraphic word on the world's monitors. Cyberspace holds

enormous potentialities, including a hope seen in connections to be found in social network systems, even though there remain some threats to our authentic being.

3. Acknowledgements

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