

Reconfiguring Silence: Technological Mediation and Human Finitude in Ted Chiang's Post-Cyborg Fiction

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Abstract: Ted Chiang's science fiction short stories *Exhalation* and *The Great Silence* formally reconfigure silence as an active, technologically mediated space for confronting fundamental existential conditions within the post-cyborg age. Moving beyond notions of silence as mere absence, the analysis demonstrates how Chiang's literary strategies—including narrative structure, perspective, imagery, and science fiction tropes—construct silence as a critical site for engaging with human finitude and the limits of knowledge (*Exhalation*) and for issuing an ethical demand to recognize the overlooked non-human other (*The Great Silence*). Drawing critically on Martin Heidegger's phenomenology of authenticity and finitude, the article contends that Chiang's work fundamentally subverts Heideggerian ideals of unmediated encounter. Instead, Chiang presents a technologically mediated authenticity emerging from collective confrontation with cosmic entropy and interspecies ethics. Defined through Katherine Hayles's posthumanism and Donna Haraway's cyborg theory, the post-cyborg condition is shown to be essential for enabling Chiang's unique literary exploration. Through close readings, this analysis positions Chiang's fiction as a significant intervention in literary studies, illustrating how science fiction formally challenges philosophical frameworks and redefines silence as a crucial category for understanding subjectivity, technology, and ethical engagement in the contemporary world.

1. The Resonance of Silence in the Post-Cyborg Age

In an era saturated by digital chatter and technological mediation, the concept of "silence" demands re-examination. Ted Chiang's science

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fiction provides a profound literary laboratory for this inquiry. This paper argues that Chiang's short stories, particularly "*Exhalation*" and "*The Great Silence*," utilize the formal strategies of science fiction to reconfigure silence not as absence, but as an active, technologically mediated space for confronting human finitude and the limits of knowledge in the post-cyborg condition. In doing so, they fundamentally challenge Heideggerian notions of authentic encounter grounded in unmediated presence (Heidegger, 1962/2008). "Before the 20th century, People were working on farms, and everything was different back then. The economic system was different, and the lives and situations of people were nothing like those of today. By the Industrial Revolution, there was the development of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of capitalism" (Darvishian et al., 2024).

Silence, as a concept, has always been fascinating to scholars and thinkers across various disciplines. In the context of the post-cyborg age, drawing primarily on N. Katherine Hayles' (2000) articulation of *the posthuman* and Donna Haraway's (2013) foundational *Cyborg Manifesto*, as a condition where boundaries between human and machine are irreversibly blurred. This integration creates new subjectivities, fundamentally altering relationships to presence, absence, and communication. Chiang's fiction, obsessed with cognition and selfhood amidst technology, uniquely explores silence within this framework. In the post-cyborg age, silence can no longer be simply understood as the absence of sound or communication. This redefinition of silence necessitates an exploration of its various dimensions.

Thus, silence in this context can be associated with feelings of isolation and marginalization. Contrary to the notion of silence as a hindrance, some post-cyborg critics argue that silence can enhance communication in the digital age. Karen Barad, a physicist and feminist theorist, suggests that silence can create space for reflection and active listening, enabling more meaningful interactions (Barad, 2003). In this perspective, silence is not simply the absence of noise but a deliberate pause that allows for deeper understanding and empathy.

In the past, governments used to silence people so that they wouldn't say anything, and that's how they exercised their authority. Traditionally, authority was imposed from the top down, with individuals expected to conform to established rules and norms. Institutions such as governments, religious organizations, and educational systems exercised power over people, dictating their actions and decisions. This authoritative structure provided a sense of order and stability, but it also limited personal freedoms and autonomy.

But in this era, the problem of authority has paradoxically changed, and people are forced to say something. In fact, in the past, authoritarian structures, organizations, and governments defined a series of rules for human beings and exercised power in this way. But in the post-cyborg era, the exercise of authority is accompanied by a series of "musts". The transformation of authority in the post-cyborg era has had profound effects on society. On one hand, it has empowered individuals to express themselves and challenge traditional power structures. On the other hand, it has also given rise to echo chambers and online mobs, where the loudest voices and the most popular opinions gain disproportionate influence.

Challenges are an inherent aspect of our existence, present in every environment we encounter, and each society has confronted its distinct array of obstacles (Alishiri, et al., 2025). Cyborgs insist on being connected to the world and are always afraid of missing something in the world, as if the world has gone into hyperactivity.

In the post-cyborg age, man has a superficial touch on the world and has lost depth. It closes every gap in daily life and has a fundamental fear and runs away from it whenever these fears come to the surface. He tries to equip himself more with technology to win, in his opinion. Silence is a crack in the wall of the world where we can look at the other side of the world for a moment. The accumulation of information, technology, the speed of obtaining various data, and the over-occupation of the human mind with different things in this world have caused those cyborgs, even in childhood, to be unable to "keep quiet". On the other hand, the set of humans' internal reactions to the data of mass communication tools, and especially the Internet, also forced him to be unable to experience loneliness and silence. It seems that one of the ways to get out of the current bottleneck and deal with the influx of this data, which causes imbalance and rupture of human personality, is the experience of silence. At a time when the age of communication is one of its names, who has time to think about silence?

The post-cyborg age is the age of fear of silence. The fear of silence is perpetuated by the constant need for external validation. Social media platforms have become a breeding ground for seeking approval and affirmation from others. We fear silence because it means we are not receiving the validation we crave. Even in the field of education, a digital linguistic setting can foster learners' comprehension of their creative capabilities and nurture their belief in their own creative abilities (Najafi, et al., 2024).

In such a way that technology and science are used to break the silence and get away from it. Telephone, satellite, television, radio... all are allies

in breaking the silence. In the field of education, the significance of technological progress pertains to the evolution of an E-learning framework that possesses the capacity to fundamentally alter the methodologies employed in the teaching and learning of the English language (Bagheri Masoumzadeh & Fatehi Rad, 2022). Postcyborg is the age of communication. In this era, no one has the right or the ability to remain silent. With the constant stream of information available at our fingertips, we are afraid that by disconnecting or being silent, we will miss out on important updates, events, or opportunities. This fear is heightened by the incessant need to be connected and up-to-date, fueled by social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. According to a study conducted by Przybylski, et al. (2013), the fear of silence is associated with higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of well-being.

2. Heidegger and the Promise of Authentic Silence

Silence should not always be interpreted as the opposite of speaking. Silence is a form of expression, and expression includes any kind of message: verbal expression, visual expression, gestural expression, etc. Silence is the opposite of sound, but it is not even the opposite of speech. Silence can be both the context of speech and its result. Beyond that, silence may imply speech! The silence that leads to the speech and the speech that ends with the silence of another have an important relationship with each other. Silence is different from being dumb and unable to speak. Silence is an attribute of something or someone who has the power to speak, but does not want to actualize this ability for now. Absolute silence is impossible, and no creature can be silent. Of course, being mute is different from being silent. Cinema was once mute, but it was never silent and could not be. The tree, the sea, the wall, etc., may be mute, but they are not silent. Each of these means at least something. So, silence is also a form of speech, and the speech of silence must be understood. Post-cyborg thinkers argue that communication extends beyond traditional verbal dialogues. Haraway (2013) in *Cyborg Manifesto* emphasizes the importance of non-human entities and their communication methods. Silence, as an alternative means of expression, aligns with this perspective. It possesses the ability to convey complex emotions, thoughts, and ideas that words may fail to articulate adequately.

We live in a time full of gossip and sometimes deafening noises that only think of negating each other; in such a period, silence is lost. Maybe we can say it like this: we will not hear the silence anymore! If we consider silence to mean negation or exclusion from speaking, we have brought the discussion to darkness rather than to light. Heidegger's (1962/2008)

philosophy provides a crucial framework for understanding silence. For Heidegger, authentic existence requires confronting finitude (*Being-towards-death*), facilitated by reticence (*Schweigen*) that allows *Dasein* to achieve resoluteness. Authentic encounter hinges on unmediated presence. Being silent exposes the absurdity of repetitive and empty words that happen to be of interest to the congregation and the media; the words of demagogues who only give deep humiliation with the superficial expression of words! Being silent is not an action aimed at oneself, but addresses the other; it is in such silence that the ability to hear is created. In this way, in silence, we hear the other, and in this way of being together, we reach a clear understanding. However, we should also pay attention to the fact that being silent does not mean not speaking at all or speaking less.

In *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, Heidegger (2012) explores the concept of *Ereignis*, translated as "the event." He suggests that the event is the ultimate source of meaning and truth, encompassing both presence and absence, being and non-being. Silence in this context becomes a means of attuning ourselves to the event and participating in its unfolding.

Heidegger's emphasis on silence can be seen as a critique of traditional Western philosophy, which often prioritizes rationality and the use of language as the primary mode of philosophical inquiry. By highlighting the significance of silence, Heidegger challenges the limitations of language and encourages us to engage with a more intuitive and holistic understanding of Being.

Furthermore, silence allows for the possibility of genuine encounter and authentic dialogue. Heidegger suggests that silence creates a space for openness and receptivity where different perspectives can come together and engage in a meaningful exchange. In this sense, silence becomes a catalyst for dialogue and the cultivation of genuine relationships.

Silence is not a mere absence of sound but a profound mode of language and being. It allows us to access the event, engage in genuine dialogue, and transcend the limitations of traditional philosophical inquiry. Understanding the meaning of silence is a key to grasping Heidegger's philosophical ideas and their implications for our understanding of existence (Heidegger, 2012).

Ted Chiang has an interesting perspective on the human debate in the post-cyborg era. On the one hand, he does not deny the services of technology to humans, and on the other hand, he has no fear of technology and artificial intelligence. Chiang's work unfolds within a post-cyborg reality Heidegger could not anticipate, where technology constitutes

subjectivity. This paper examines how Chiang's literary constructions of silence critically engage Heidegger, demonstrating not unmediated authenticity, but a technologically mediated authenticity that redefines silence as a space for confronting limits—a space impossible within Heidegger's human-centric ontology.

In his stories, we perceive two kinds of time. One is quantitative time, and the other is qualitative time. The importance of emotional intelligence, which is characterized as the capacity to recognize, evaluate, and manage both personal and others' emotions, has increasingly been acknowledged in educational environments across the globe (Khodami, 2023). Ted Chiang, an acclaimed science fiction writer, explores various themes in his works, including the concept of time and its relationship with silence. Quantitative time refers to the measurement of time in terms of seconds, minutes, hours, and so on. It is a linear and objective concept that allows us to organize our daily lives and schedule events. However, Chiang challenges this notion by introducing the idea of qualitative time, which is subjective and non-linear. Qualitative time is experienced differently by individuals and can be influenced by factors such as emotions, perception, and personal experiences.

In Chiang's stories, silence often serves as a metaphor for the ineffable and the mysterious. It represents a pause in the flow of time, a moment of introspection and reflection. This silence is not merely the absence of sound but a deeper stillness that allows characters to connect with the metaphysical aspects of existence. It is through this silence that Chiang explores the boundaries of time and its impact on human consciousness.

Chiang's exploration of qualitative time in relation to silence invites readers to reflect on the limitations of our linear perception of time. It encourages us to question the boundaries we impose on time and consider the possibility of a deeper, more interconnected understanding. By intertwining silence with the metaphysical aspects of time, Chiang prompts us to contemplate the nature of existence and our place within the vastness of the universe.

Ted Chiang's works offer a thought-provoking exploration of time and its relationship with silence. Through the use of qualitative time, Chiang challenges our conventional understanding of time as a linear and objective concept. Instead, he invites us to consider the subjective and non-linear nature of time and the profound moments of silence that allow us to connect with the metaphysical aspects of existence. Chiang's stories serve as a reminder that there is more to time than mere measurement, and that silence can be a gateway to deeper understanding and self-discovery.

3. Exhalation: Silence as the Architecture of Entropic Revelation

Exhalation employs science fiction conventions—mechanical beings in a pressurized argon world—to construct silence as an active, technologically inscribed space for confronting finitude. The narrative itself is a mediated act: a recorded message etched onto foil (Chiang, 2019, p. 73). This formal choice challenges Heidegger's privileging of unmediated presence; the confrontation with death *depends* on technological inscription. Chiang builds silence through imagery and pacing. The sealed dissection chamber becomes a resonant space. The draining of air—"I opened my valve as wide as possible" (Chiang, 2019, p. 76)—is a "narrative enactment" of entropy. The silence grows palpable: "The quiet was absolute... the silence of a world where no wind blew" (p. 77). This is not passive absence, but the active presence of cosmic fate. The protagonist's calm, analytical observation during dissection reframes silence as a space for revelation: "What I saw... was the universe itself" (p. 78). The climax—"The universe began as an enormous breath being held. Who knows why, but whatever the reason, I am glad that it did" (p. 80)—redefines silence as primordial state and destination. Technological mediation enables a form of authentic acceptance that is collective ("we who are now living," p. 80) and materially embedded, diverging from Heidegger's individual "Dasein". The SF genre enables this exploration. Mechanical bodies literalize the post-cyborg condition; air as life/thought medium makes its absence viscerally existential. The alien perspective defamiliarizes death (Vint, 2007), constructing silence as the ground for technologically mediated revelation of finitude.

The silence in *Exhalation* breathes a new spirit into human life. In fact, there is a commotion in the heart and inside of a person even when there is silence. This uproar includes a set of brain and heart activities that are either engaged in reconstructing information and data and external receptions, or in the process of separating values and categorizing them in line with the archive, or in the process of processing information and findings. Undoubtedly, natural activity cannot be closed, but it can be restrained and organized in such a way that a kind of relative peace is created in the inner space of a person. When we talk about silence, it means not speaking, but this is only the first and initial stage of listening. Therefore, external and internal silence and good listening and paying attention to the speaker will make a person reach the knowledge that is useful for him; Because without any confusion or prejudice, he compares the new hearings with the previous ones at the opportunity, and by criticizing and evaluating, he acquires new truths and sciences and adds to his knowledge.

4. The Great Silence: Silence as the Space of the Overlooked and the Ethical Demand

The Great Silence uses non-human narration (a parrot) to construct silence as the space of the overlooked. The narrative voice embodies silence: parrots facing extinction, ignored by humans searching for extraterrestrial intelligence. "They call it the Great Silence," the parrot observes, "the absence of a message. But the universe is the message" (Chiang, 2016, para. 1). This reconfigures silence—not absence, but misdirected focus. Chiang builds silence through juxtaposition. The Arecibo Observatory's technological search contrasts with parrots in the reserve: "We're a non-human species capable of communicating with them... Aren't we exactly what humans are looking for?" (para. 3). Silence is actively produced by human disregard. The parrot's narration transforms silence into an accusation: "The Great Silence is the absence of a message. But the universe is the message" (para. 1). The reserve's imagery becomes a sanctuary of non-human meaning. Contemplating extinction—"When we're gone, the universe will be speaking only to itself" (para. 7)—frames silence as a contraction of possibility. This challenges Heidegger: authentic encounter requires confronting the other's finitude, mediated by the technology (the observatory), blinding humans to nearby presence. Authenticity demands recognizing non-human silence/speech—an ethical impossibility in Heidegger's solipsistic framework. SF conventions—parrot narrator and SETI context—enable radical defamiliarization (Canavan & Suvin, 2016, p. 4), exposing human myopia and redefining whose silence matters. The genre allows exploration of communication failure from a non-human perspective (Wittenberg, 2016, p. 189), making constructed silence ethically resonant.

When a person listens well and files his information in a corner when he receives new information, such a person has a good opportunity to judge between two types of information without getting caught in anxiety and confusion. Therefore, the most important way to improve life in the post-cyborg era is to become silent and listen well, to experience pure silence and listening with soul, and to create an opportunity to "exhale" for yourself, as Chiang said. The post-cyborg era, characterized by the integration of technology into every aspect of human life, presents both opportunities and challenges for individuals. In this era, it is crucial for individuals to prioritize silence and listening as a means to improve their lives. By experiencing pure silence and listening with the soul, individuals can connect with their inner selves, foster meaningful relationships, and find solace in a fast-paced and technology-driven world.

Chiang's stories reconfigure silence through SF affordances. In *Exhalation*, silence is a mediated space for cosmic revelation; in *The Great Silence*, it is the space of the overlooked demanding ethical recognition. Both operate within the post-cyborg condition (Hayles, 2000, p. 3). Chiang's construction of silence extends Sherryl Vint's (2007) analysis of his "materiality of cognition" (p. 141) by showing how silence materially manifests limits. David Wittenberg (2016) notes Chiang's focus on "epistemic limits" (p. 189); silence becomes the literary manifestation of confronting those limits. Chiang intervenes in posthumanist debates (Haraway, 2013; Hayles, 2000) by demonstrating SF's unique capacity to construct silence as a critical category for the post-cyborg condition.

5. The Literary Resonance of Post-Cyborg Silence

Ted Chiang's *Exhalation* and *The Great Silence* employ SF's formal resources to reconfigure silence. Beyond absence, Chiang constructs it as an active, technologically mediated space for confronting finitude (*Exhalation*) and issuing ethical demands (*The Great Silence*). This literary construction subverts Heideggerian phenomenology. Authentic encounter emerges through technological mediation and requires ethical openness to the non-human. Chiang uses SF's estrangement—mechanical beings, parrot narrators—to defamiliarize silence, revealing its active force in navigating post-cyborg existence. By centering Chiang's textual strategies, this analysis contributes to literary scholarship by demonstrating how SF formally interrogates philosophical concepts. It positions Chiang within critical posthumanism through his narrative construction of silence as a space of revelation and ethical demand—a crucial intervention for understanding technological being-in-the-world.

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