Posthumanism and the Posthuman in Don DeLillo's Point Omega *and* Zero K

Stefan Herbrechter

> [T]he novel is one of the most powerful and inventive critical tools we have with which to address the emerging conditions of a new being in the world. (Boxall, 2013: 14)

1. *Literature, Posthumanism and the Posthuman*

> Is [the posthuman] a utopian aspiration, a cautionary critique, an evolutionary end-point? Is the posthuman era upon us, or must it remain a permanent possibility, forever just out of reach? (Sheehan, 2015: 245)

Posthumanism, as a critical discourse (see Herbrechter, 2013), is best understood as the ongoing "deconstruction of humanism" (Badmington, 2000). It challenges the anthropocentrism and exceptionalism on which humanism is based. The figure of the "posthuman" (cyborgs, AI, but also "earlier" (monstrous) nonhuman others like zombies, chimeras, aliens etc.) are signs that legitimating human dominance over everything else on this plant comes at a price. All those nonhuman others against which humanism defines "human nature" come back to haunt it, especially today, at a time of planetary challenges and fear of extinction (cf. Colebrook, 2012). Posthumanism and the posthuman are therefore not new, they have been humanism's constant companions. They express and force us to engage with humanism's worst nightmares but also its deepest desires, at a time, when what it means to be human is less certain than ever.

Fiction – and the novel more specifically – as a "speculative" discourse, plays a privileged role in this: fears and desires are "imaginary" in the sense that they have the capacity to imagine other realities (including alternative, nonhuman-centred ones) based on a (more or less) critical understanding of "existing" worlds. The novel's relation with posthumanism is thus originary and generative, as a look at contents of *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Clarke and Rossini, 2017) with its contributions ranging from the periods of "Medieval" to "Postmodern" and genres from "Autobiography" to "Science Fiction" and its themes from "Objects" to "Futures" demonstrates. It's therefore probably more productive to think of posthumanism as a discourse and of the posthuman as appearing "across the ages". Seen in this context, the age-old idea that humans wish to overcome what

they think they are, in the 21st century maybe reaches a new, intensified, phase driven by nano-, info-, neuro- and biotechnologies on the one hand, and climate change, loss of biodiversity and extinction threats, on the other hand. This would justify to speak of (some) contemporary literature as a "literature of the posthuman", that faces a situation "in which the human itself can only be contemplated from elsewhere, from some posthuman perspective" (Boxall, 2015: 127).

With reference to contemporary literature most readers would thus probably expect to hear about the *contemporary* proliferation of "posthuman bodies" (from androids to cyborgs to clones) and literary reactions to "the specifically technological outcomes of thinking through and beyond the human" and "human perfectibility" (Sheehan, 245). However, the "posthumanisation" of the (human and nonhuman animal) body is only *one* important interest in contemporary literature informed by "a posthuman becoming of unlimited desire" (Sheehan, 2015: 250). There are questions raised by contemporary fiction that are equally important as "technological posthumanism", with its mutating, cloned techno-bodies with their threat or promise of informational "dematerialisation" and mediatisation. That doesn't mean of course that Paul Sheehan isn't right in seeing a parallel between the novel and its contemporary "post-generic" plasticity and the transformative potential of posthuman bodies (he identifies four current forms of "posthuman bodies" as "post-generic archetypes" appearing in contemporary fiction: the cybernetic body (e.g. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*), the cloned body (*Never Let Me Go*), the cannibal body (*The Road*) and the zombie body (*Zone One*)).

A somewhat more ambivalent approach can be seen in Peter Boxall's work. In his "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman" (Boxall, 2015) Boxall begins with the following statement: "It is one of the peculiar contradictions of modernity that the technology that extends the reach of the human, that helps humans to master their environment, also works to weaken the human itself as a category" (127). This peculiar dialectic finds its "logical conclusion" in the "current environmental crisis that threatens our planet"; it is a sign that the "technology that has allowed humankind to control the planet has also made it inhospitable to humans, and to all other species" (127). The double-edged sword of technological extension (and originary technicity (cf. Bradley, 2011)) of humans is what Boxall traces as the fundamental built-in "posthuman logic". Its effect is that "technology amplifies the human only to the extent that it dwarfs it" and which testifies to the "emergence of a posthuman structure of feeling at work in the British fiction of the postwar" (Boxall, 2015: 130):

> The development of the novel in the period [since 1945] is arguably characterised by the lapsing of the human as the dominant figure for civilised life, and the emergence of a posthuman rhetoric and aesthetic, which shares much with the other postal compounds that shape cultural life in the later decades of the century – such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and so on. (130)

By entering in a phase of accelerated technological transformation the novel's choice seems to be one between "resistance", or a "defense of the natural body", and acceleration or the embrace of a "postnatural body" (i.e. a tension or "splitting between a residual, natural human and a technologically produced posthuman", as Boxall argues (131)).

This posthumanisation process – accompanied and driven by globalisation – doesn't go uncontested, however, as Boxall already noted in his *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (Boxall, 2013) where he traced a "profound disjunction between our real, material environments and the new technological, political and aesthetic forms in which our global relations are being conducted" (9) the sensibility of many contemporary novelists. Posthumanism can thus be seen as the ideological battleground of an underlying political, economic, technological etc. process (i.e. globalised posthumanisation) that provokes the ambient return of realism and the desire to "grasp the texture of the contemporary real":

> There is, in the fiction of the new century, as well as in the very wide range of other disciplines and intellectual networks, a strikingly new attention to the nature of our reality – its materiality, its relation to touch, to narrative and to visuality… one can see the emergence of new kinds of realism, a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real, as it offers itself as the material substrate of our being in the world. (Boxall, 2013: 10)

Closely related to this turn towards what might be called a new "speculative" realism is the realisation of a "deep and far-reaching crisis in our understanding of the limits of the human" (Boxall, 2013: 12-13) and a "fascination with the shifting boundary between the human and the nonhuman, and with the ethical, political and cultural challenges that such transformations represent" (13).

2. Don DeLillo

> Extinction was a current theme of his. (DeLillo, 2010: 25)

It's only human to want to know more, and then more, and then more… But it's also true that what we don't know is what makes us human. And there's no end to knowing. (DeLillo, 2016: 131)

Following on from this evaluation of contemporary literature, I am specifically interested in the role DeLillo plays in Boxall's argument. I'd like to argue that DeLillo is particularly relevant to this line of argument even while his recent work might also call for some qualifications of it. DeLillo's more recent novels (from *Underworld* (1987) onwards) have been reflecting themes that are often associated with posthumanism: digitalisation, embodiment, globalisation, terrorism, artificial intelligence and climate change. In his latest novel, *Zero K*, DeLillo seems to critically engage with the *question* of posthumanism, specifically.

The way DeLillo's work "from the 1971 *Americana* to the 1997 *Underworld*" is described by Boxall as "a narrative frame for the running out of late twentieth-century time" (Boxall, 2013: 25). Interestingly, while *Underworld* is read by Boxall as "a narrative form in which a late historical condition might recognize itself", DeLillo's "post-apocalyptic" novels of the twenty-first century, from *The Body Artist* onwards, "speak an extraordinary lack of spatial or temporal awareness, a sudden drastic failure of the bonds that hold us in time and space" (27) and which, instead, "suggest a new technological-economic complex, with *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist* in particular "set in this peculiarly slowed, stalled time" (27). DeLillo's first novels of the twenty-first century (i.e. after 9/11) "are written in a strikingly new spirit, a suddenly spare, late style which displays an extraordinary historical disorientation" (28), which leads Boxall to conclude that DeLillo might be a kind of test case for the transition from "late [postmodern] culture" to an entirely new sense of time characterised by the "unbound chronology of a new century, in which narrative itself is uncertain of its co-ordinates, and in which the technological and political forces which govern the passing of time become strange, new and unreadable" (Boxall, 2013: 29-30). DeLillo's late work is thus both symptom and critique of this change and he, as a writer, is acting both *against* and synchronous *with* his time. This makes him part of a generation of writers who, in their "late post-2000 phase" more or less critically accompany the transition from late postmodernism to a new experience of time and space provided by socio-economic globalisation and media-technological digitalisation, which, for the sake of convenience, one might call posthumanist.

Already in 2006, DeLillo had played a key articulating role in this changeover in Boxall's *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*. In the face of "an extended enactment of the exhaustion of possibility in post-war culture" and a "colonised", "post-apocalyptic future" (Boxall, 2006: 4),

"DeLillo's novels posit a world in which the nonexistant, the unnameable, the unthinkable, have been eradicated; in which cultural truth is disseminated by the forces of a globalised capital from which there is no escape" (5). So, even if, through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, "DeLillo's fiction is organised around the possibility of a historical counterfunction, of a counternarratrive that might preserve a radical revolutionary spirit, that might keep possibility alive in the thin air of the 'end of history'" (5). However, DeLillo's fiction is not simply "an enactment of the exhaustion of [historical] possibility" (8) but, in Boxall's view, it is "at once a critique and an enactment of the possibility of fiction in the post-war" (15) underpinned by an unnameable longing or "yearning for something that is missing" or the "unrealised" in history, and "which allows thought and history to persist" (15). While this places DeLillo's work at a critical angle to the general understanding of what postmodernism is or was, it also places him in a critical position to what is generally understood by posthumanism, namely the progressive (techno-utopian) displacement of the human by media and technology. Instead, as Boxall argues, the preservation of "the possibility of fiction" that characterises DeLillo's work, is achieved through a techno-critical shadowing of techno-media history or "the slow passage from the mimeograph, through the telex machine, to email and the internet", which suggests that "the mediation of the culture is not yet total, that there are other histories that can be written and imagined, unrealised possibilities that remain dormant in the culture, unthought, and offline" (Boxall, 2006: 6-7). In narrating the accelerated posthumanisation of "late" (contemporary) culture, DeLillo now finds a new role for the new century, I would argue, namely that of a *critical* posthumanist, or a critical observer of the current redefinition of the human (and its limits) and what this might mean as far as the possibility of fiction and its survival are concerned.

DeLillo says as much in his reaction to 9/11, "In the ruins of the future", where he criticises what he calls "the utopian glow of [Western; read "American"] cyber-capital" with its belief that "[t]echnology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet" (DeLillo, 2001: n.p.). Instead, DeLillo sees a (*neo*humanist, or rehumanising) task for the writer of fiction in providing a counternarrative to the combination of posthumanising technology and "nostalgic" terrorism to rise from "the ruins of the future" (DeLillo, 2001). This neohumanist counternarrative in the face of technology and terrorism is at the heart of DeLillo's oeuvre, as Joseph Tabbi already explained in 1995: "Technology pervades the most ordinary existence, and by integrating technology into his narrative, DeLillo carries his fiction beyond the limits of a mere literary experimentation to what we might call a postmodern [posthumanist?] or conceptual naturalism" (Tabbi, 1995: 174). Tabbi understands

"naturalism" in the sense that "the novelist comes to share most deeply in the technological culture by… being receptive to the expressive power in its products and so bringing these otherwise mute forms into the realms of language, symbol and metaphor" (185). One could thus argue that the post-postmodern, posthumanist, writer "*construct*[s] a truth by actively perceiving a narrative form in material that is real but not itself linguistic" (185).

3. Point Omega *and* Zero K – *A Posthumanist Reading (cf. Callus & Herbrechter, 2008)*

> At this point in the twenty-first century, it has become difficult to take up the topic of temporality in contemporary fiction without reference to the geological concept of the Anthropocene. (Marshall, 2015: 523)

The best way to understand *contemporary* posthumanism in my view is to see it as an emerging paradigm in which what it means to be human is again subject to radical changes, partly due to technological development but also because of changing environmental conditions brought about by humans themselves (i.e. the Anthropocene). It is an ontological, epistemological and ecological crisis that could go either way and which produces and supports very different ideologies and strategies. In terms of recent developments in (literary) theory the various positions depend on where they stand with regard to posthumanism's immediate predecessors – poststructuralism and postmodernism – and their so-called "de-centring" of the (human) subject. In terms of continuity with previous posts, posthumanism could be understood as another, even more radical phase in this decentring process, namely as the most radical "turn" in theory yet - the "nonhuman turn" (cf. Grusin, 2015) – which demands that the notion of "postanthropocentrism" must be taken seriously. However, for those who see the decentring of the (human) subject in a purely negative way – an offense to human dignity and solidarity – postanthropocentrism is most certainly a decentring turn too far, which explains the many faceted "returns", backlashes and neohumanist tendencies in the first decades of the 21st century. Accompanying and increasingly overtaking this ideological discussion are trends that just press ahead with human self-substitution, the evolutionary "next stage" (AI), informed by the belief that technology can somehow save us (even without a proper consideration of what this "us" might be). This, arguably, is the complex context in which DeLillo's *Point Omega* should be read.

Kate Marshall begins her inquiry into the "novels of the Anthropocene" with a quotation from DeLillo's *Point Omega*: "Do we have to be humans forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back

now to the inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field" (DeLillo, 2010: 67). The character, Richard Elster, who speaks these words is a disaffected "metaphysician" and former government war "ideologue" specialising in the question of "rendition". He finds himself in a desert retreat with a filmmaker who wants to shoot a documentary about him. Marshall includes *Point Omega* among a number of "new novels of a newly self-aware geological period" (2015: 524) that may be referred to as "speculative fiction" and which correspond to the "speculative realism" often associated with the "nonhuman turn" in critical theory (537).

In a similar vein, David Cowart places *Point Omega* squarely within what he calls "the disquiet experienced by Americans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries" as "something that everyone feels and no one fully understands" (Cowart, 2012: 31) and which answers to "an evolving grammar of dread" (36). *Point Omega* thus both fits into the general thrust of DeLillo's oeuvre but also adds to the poignancy and precariousness of disappearing humanity, as Mads Rosendahl Thomsen explains:

> DeLillo does not have a grand vision of a trans- and posthuman reality, but nevertheless, in his work, future change is a defining element that circles around different ways in which humanity could be changed, triggered by different desires that are expressed in both the explicit reflections and the actions of the characters. Thus, it is possible to discern various types of desires in his novels. One relates to becoming one with nature or the universe, and ceasing to be human, which is presented as an attractive possibility through hints at a broader cosmological understanding, where ideas of the non-trivial nature of the material world are accentuated, while human consciousness is described as exhausted… another desire goes directly in the opposite direction, focusing on the ability of information to dominate and create its own world. (Rosendahl Thomsen 2013: 199)

Elster, as the representative of a new postanthropocentric cosmology recalling Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the *point oméga*, is a disenchanted humanities academic and ex-advisor to the Bush administration over its Gulf War strategy, who voices his misanthropic disaffection with humanity:

> We want to be the dead matter we used to be. We're the last billionth of a second in the evolution of matter. When I was a student I looked for radical ideas. Scientists, theologians, I read the work of mystics through the centuries, I was a hungry mind, a pure mind. I filled notebooks with my visions of world philosophy. Look at us today. We keep

inventing folk tales of the end. Animal diseases spreading, transmittable cancers. What
else? (DeLillo 2010: 64).

The dialogue [between Elster and the documentary film maker Jim Finley] inevitably turns to
climate change, asteroids and famine as possible end-of-the-world scenarios, which Elster
nevertheless rejects as "uninteresting". Instead, he calls for "thinking further, as he attempts to
sketch out principles of evolution and annihilation, and of the collective thought that exists
outside the individual, as a collective hive mind" (Rosendahl Thomsen 2013: 188).

A key to *Point Omega* is DeLillo's use of Douglas Gordon's video art installation *24 Hour
Psycho* (1993). This piece of installation art, which continues DeLillo's longstanding motif of
intermediality (or "cinematic ekphrasis" (cf. Cowart, 2012)) is an extremely slowed-down
projection of Hitchcock's movie *Psycho* (1960) and is itself connected to the paleo-ontological
theme of species disappearance, deep time geology: "it was like watching the universe die over
a period of about seven billion years" (DeLillo 2010: 59).

Point Omega and its "slowness" also play a prominent part in Lutz Koepnick's study *On
Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (2014), which includes DeLillo's novel
within a "contemporary poetic of slow writing and reading" (Koepnick, 2014: 254): "*Point
Omega*'s poetic plays out the finite and frail vectors of existential time against the oppressive
and ever accelerating logic of social and technological temporality" (262). It is the style – the
ekphrastic role that Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* plays for the narrative and structure of *Point
Omega* – that "invites the subject to recognize its own limitations while exploring the unstable
space between the unique and the reproducible, between the ephemeral and the seemingly
timeless, between the fickleness of human time and the deep or steady temporality of geological
formations and modern machines of information storage" (273). This recognition,
linguistically, is emulated by what Koepnick calls DeLillo's "linguistic minimalism – language
that engages with the very possibility of meaning and expression" – "each word, each phrase,
strikes the reader as if being wrest away from the deserts of utter silence" (275) – with its effect
of opening up a space for slowness amidst "our accelerated movements through screen culture"
(275): "To explore the space and time in between individual words and sentences – the silent
and unsaid as sites of potentiality or virtuality – is what DeLillo's compact prose encourages
readers to do" (275). In doing so, "like Gordon's frames, DeLillo's sentences inch toward the
monadic and static" (277) and offer "an interface across what exceeds the neoliberal stress of
self-management" (277). Pieter Vermeulen summarizes this stylistic effect in *Point Omega*
thus:

The strategy of slowing down the action breaks open the normal pacing of human action and perception in order to remove it from the realm of the eventual ("whatever was happening took forever to happen [DeLillo, 2010: 4]; and further, its decision to slow down the movie to exactly 24 hours synchronizes human life with the cosmic rhythms of night and day – a shift beyond human categories that the novel's main narrative, which takes place in a desert that refuses to be constrained by human names (…), will repeat. (Vermeulen, 2017: 6-7)

According to Koepnick, Elster "seems to desire nothing so much than to account for the relativity of human affairs vis-à-vis the longue durée of geological time, the deep history of the landscape and of the earth. His desire is not to end desire, but rather to experience a different scale, a different analytic, of how to measure the passing of things" (Koepnick, 2014: 270) or simply to "experience what exceeds and denies experience" (270). And for the filmmaker Finley and his project this desire, Elster's search for deep time, can only be rendered by an "extreme long-take cinematography":

the embeddedness of human time in temporalities that exceed human finitude; the hovering of the subject between what can and what cannot be controlled, between the simple and the complex, the determined and the indeterminate, between global society's relentless speed and the landscape's unchangeable nature. (271)

Koepnick, in my view, provides an admirable description of a (critical) posthumanist agenda when he writes:

Elster's slowness describes a project of neither fleeing into a spiritualist celebration of timeless humanism nor into apocalyptic and posthistorical antihumanism, but of seeing and thinking calmly in the face of the complexities of the present – probing the contours of what may count as human in the first place and refracting historically hardened notions of subjectivity by exposing one's self to what is nonhuman and incommensurable. (272)

The slowness of *Point Omega* and *24 Hour Psycho* in their ekphrastic juxtaposition thus produces a recognition within the subject of his or her own limitations vis-à-vis the enormity of prehuman geological deep time and the posthuman acceleration of "machinic speed".

Point Omega plays a similar supporting role in Pieter Vermeulen's excellent essay on "the Anthropocene and the scales of literature" (Vermeulen, 2014), even while he adds another, more sceptical, layer to the question of posthumanism and literature. Against the belief that the novel might be that genre which "has the capacity to deliver ever more 'otherness'" and which

"can serve as an appropriate imaginative vehicle for addressing the ethical and political problems that face us in the early twenty-first century" (2), Vermeulen reminds us (following an argument first articulated by Timothy Morton) that the question of "scaling up its imagining of the human to the dimensions of biological and geological time" is today's major challenge for the novel which might well stretch its generic limits to new levels of unrecognizability. Vermeulen uses *Point Omega* to show that "globalization merges with other decidedly non- or post-human powers" (3) and which constitutes a "move beyond the temporality of trauma, and its foreclosure of global extension, to the nonhuman vastness of *geological* time" (3). How to make this vastness visible to the "human" eye? *Point Omega* is interesting precisely in that it shows how the "impact of nonhuman otherness on human life… strains the limits of the novel form" (Vermeulen, 2014: 4). It constitutes a "confrontation with the limits of human imagination" (4), which means that "*Point Omega* can be read as an attempt to overcome the reliance of the novel form on distinctive events and identifiable individual agents, which can be considered as limitations on the novel's ability to abandon conventional realisms and imagine the geological ramifications of culture" (10).

Point Omega as thus an allegory of self-reflexive, *critical* posthumanism itself. Like Elster, who is giving "a series of lectures [in Zurich]… on what he called the dream of extinction" (DeLillo 2010: 45), we've become interested in the "force of geologic time" (24), where the desert has become a "protoworld", as well as an "alien being" *and* "science fiction" (25). "Time becoming slowly older. Enormously old. Not day by day. This is deep time, epochal time. Our lives receding into the long past. That's what's out there. The Pleistocene desert, the rule of extinction" (91). Waiting for point omega to arrive ("the point of waiting just to be waiting" (60), "witnessing the last flare of human thought" (65) when "brute matter becomes analytical human thought" (66), desiring the "paroxysm" (92). And despite of all his inhuman disaffection, when the posthumanist Elster has to face the idea that his daughter has been killed and has to return to civilisation he remains "inconsolably human" (121). There is probably no better way to explain the ambiguity of the posthuman situation and how literature, staring at the ruins of the future, almost helplessly keeps reminding itself of the impossibility of its task, namely, to quote Elster one last time: "to cure the terror of time" (DeLillo 2010: 57).

Zero K (DeLillo, 2016), too, is a novel that "intimates a failing species on a threatened planet" (Schaberg, 2017: 91). However, DeLillo here takes on the transhumanist fantasies of human life extension, especially cryogenics, in order to "construct a counternarrative truth" about the

human condition in the age of transhuman technology. The plot of the novel develops out of the opposition between Ross Lockhart and his son Jeffrey who, according to Tony Tulathimutte, are "foils, representing two competing visions of a human being, not to mention DeLillo's competing impulses as a writer". Ross, a rich businessman (motivated by his wife Artis's terminal multiple-sclerosis) is investing in a firm called the Convergence, which claims to have developed a safe technology of "cryopreservation":

> In Jeffrey we have the Enlightenment humanist, a book-lover as much concerned with the death of the humanities as with the death of humanity, who dismisses the Convergence as "a highly precise medical procedure guided by mass delusion, by superstition and arrogance and self-deception". His skepticism is rooted in a belief that death and identity are essential to being human, and that the human essence is monistic – one body, one soul, under God, indivisible… His father, meanwhile, is the visionary [trans]humanist, who sees death as a logistical problem, life as a quantifiable and measurable phenomenon…, and the human as a separable biological entity, essentially reducible to body and brain. (Tulathimutte, 2016: n.p.)

Rachele Dini sees *Zero K* as another example of DeLillo's "speculative turn – from historiography to futurography" in his postmillennial writing (Dini, 2016: 1), where linguistic sparseness and a continued "faith in the physical" (i.e. human bodies) is part of a "reclaiming [of] matter" used for the "crafting [of an alternative] future" (2).

So, after speculating on posthumanist themes like deep time, climate change and extinction in *Point Omega*, what DeLillo, in *Zero K*, takes on is the techno-utopian aspect of posthumanism. DeLillo's work like that of most of his contemporaries has of course always been about media and technology (and indeed the *convergence* of media and technology, especially through the process of digitalisation) and the changes in subjectivity that various technologies afford. *Zero K*, however, is *literally* about science and fiction (and their increasing *convergence* in contemporary technocapitalist, globalised, neoliberal society), without strictly speaking being a science fiction novel as such. Instead it openly thematises the role of techno-utopianism and techno-dystopianism and displays a scepticism towards both. It also has clear traits of the "cli-fi" (climate change fiction) genre. In this sense, DeLillo again takes up a current cultural anxiety and promise, namely the fear *and* desire of becoming somehow *trans*human in the face of ambient extinction threats and species angst. *Zero K*'s programmatic statement (uttered by Ross Lockhart, the main financer of the Convergence's cryopreservation project) is: "Everybody wants to own the end of the world" (3). It shows the exhaustion and cynicism of capitalism's

final (global, posthumanist) phase in which it anticipates the ownership and consumption of its own apocalypse – the apocalypse on which it has been thriving as a form of "zombie" survival. In analogy, Ross stands for the (privileged) individual who wants to survive (or "own") even his death (even if that means that he might have to anticipate its moment by inducing death for the sake of insuring "controlled cryopreservation"). The idea that every death of an individual is the death of a whole "world" is one of the fundamental assumptions of liberal humanism, an inevitable "tragedy" that nevertheless, like every tragedy, is supposed to have its cathartic effect. In the case of death this ultimately lies in "proving" humanity and its ultimate "sharedness". In reaction to his son's mocking scepticism towards this "faith-based technology" (8), Ross merely asks him to "respect the idea" (10). To Ross's discredit, however, it is worth noting that he "made an early reputation by analysing the profit impact of natural disaster", which literally makes him a "disaster capitalist".

Formally, the novel is divided into two parts with one brief interlude. The first part, "In the Time of Chelyabinsk", a big city in Russia, North of Kazakhstan probably best known for a meteorite that exploded in the sky above the city, in 2013 (DeLillo specifically thematises this, e.g. DeLillo, 2016: 188), contains the first visit to the Convergence and ends with the cryopreservation of Artis, Ross's second wife. Ross had planned to "die" with her but decides to postpone his procedure in order to return to "city life" for a better preparation of his "worldly affairs". While the first part in terms of time and location gives the impression of timelessness and remove by way of anticipation of a post-apocalyptic futurity, the second part is called, "In the Time of Konstantinovka" – a small city in Eastern Ukraine and very much "inside history" as a place of social unrest and terrorism, as a result of Russian oppression and pro-Russian separatism. The two parts are separated by an eight-page-long interlude entitled "Artis Martineau", which represents a kind of meditative reflection of the supposedly "cryopreserved mind activity" of Artis – the impersonated posthuman (body) artist so to speak – musing over the disembodied identity of a "Woman's body in a pod" (DeLillo, 2016: 162). The two main parts stand in a relation of both contrast and continuity with each other. Themes that span across are the role of "the digital" (and screen media more specifically) in the contemporary human "identity crisis", which is connected to the question of reality and the role of language. The more specifically posthuman or, rather, transhuman theme of "embodiment" (the mind-body split) and the role of technology in overcoming death is discussed in two major speeches made by Convergence ideologues, the Stenmark Twins in Part 1 (DeLillo, 2016: 61-78) and Nadja Hrabal in Part 2 (238-46). A third major theme is "time, timelessness and futurity", which is already announced in the first sentence of the novel – the already quoted "Everybody wants to

own the end of the world" (3), which is reflected upon once more by Jeff at the very end of the novel when he recalls "the lurking image of my father telling me that everybody wants to own the end of the world" (274).

What both the transhumanist and the (neo)humanist voices in the novel thus compete for is what might be called "futurity", or the right to determine reality which, in turn, can be used to legitimate actions that are designed to "construct the future" (e.g. that of "humanity"). It is science-fictional politics, *literally*, which is the only politics still available in posthumanist, late modernity. From a *trans*humanist perspective, one might argue, the question concerning human futurity is "What happens to the idea of continuum – past, present, future – in the cryonic chamber… How human are you without your sense of time? More human than ever? Or do you become fetal, an unborn thing?" (DeLillo, 2016: 68). What also places the novel within the context of the current discussion about the figure of the posthuman, as well as within the crisis of climate change and the Anthropocene, is the fact that it relies on a structural similarity with "last man" or "lone survivor" stories. Jeff articulates this towards the end of the novel (before taking up the initial and final theme of "the end of the world" again), when he realizes that: "I wasn't only his son, I was *the* son, the survivor, the heir apparent" (DeLillo, 2016: 255). His role, as first person narrator, is therefore that of the survivor-witness: "This was my role, to watch whatever they put in front of me" (139). His main concern thus remains a fundamentally "realist" one: how to bear witness to, in this case, "futurity" – the basic challenge of contemporary fiction – or, how to address the fundamental contradiction buried in the phrase "*speculative* realism". This is articulated in the novel at two levels, the fight over time, futurity and reality, on the one hand, and the role of language and "names" (another constant theme in DeLillo), on the other hand. The Convergence situates itself outside history (outside the "world hum", 135) – the time of "Cheylabinsk", the epiphany, the veer between life and death, in spatial and temporal remoteness: "You are completely outside the narrative of what we refer to as history" (237), which is the only hope of creating a sense of "pure" or "alternative" futurity: "They're making the future. A new idea of the future. Different from the others" (30). The "heralds" – people like Artis and Ross, who "die" before their time – function like the (modernist) avant-garde artist. Jeff, on the other hand, upon his return to "the world hum" of "real" (i.e. historical) life, informed by his profound distrust of anything digital, speaks of a "plunge into prehistory" (226), while he sees the cryogenised human bodies as "prehistoric artifacts": "Those were humans entrapped, enfeebled, individual lives stranded in some border region of a wishful future… It was a form of visionary art, it was body art with broad implications…" (256).

One interesting aspect of the Convergence, however, is its very own relationship to the "digital", which it seems to accept as a technology but wishes to expel or reject as an ontology. Inside the compound the atmosphere is (apart from the screen and the medical equipment) "Precambrian" (20), the rooms are "not fitted with digital connections" (20), even though "elaborate cyber-defense" is part of the future-proofing of the entire cryopreservation venture (30). This repression actually coincides with Jeff's distrust of the digital that gains strength as the novel progresses. Digitalisation is a theme that DeLillo has been engaging with in most of his novels. In *Zero K*, digital (screen) media play a very important part in the negotiation between a transhumanist notion of technology as ontology, and a posthumanist or neo-materialist view of technology as "matter-realism" (cf. Braidotti, 2013: 158-59). Early on in the novel, Artis – the transhumanist body artist – for example, expresses her "bio-constructivist" view of perception and reality:

> I'm aware that when we see something, we are getting only a measure of information, a sense, an inkling of what is really there to see… the optic nerve is not telling the full truth. We're seeing only intimations. The rest is our invention, our way of reconstructing what is actual, if there is any such thing, philosophically, that we can call actual. I know that research is being done here, somewhere in this complex, on future models of human vision. Experiments using robots, lab animals, who knows, people like me. (DeLillo, 2016: 45)

Artis speaks of her experience of a new vision after surgery on her right eye, twelve years before, and now projects her enhanced vision onto "futurity" (which interestingly also contains aspects of postanthropocentrism): "I remember clearly what I thought. I thought, Is this the world as it truly looks? Is this the reality we haven't learned how to see?... Is this the world that animals see?... The world that belongs to hawks, to tigers in the wild?" (46). This transcendent vision of an entirely new expanded reality is reflected, on the one hand, in the proliferating virtuality of the digital screens in the novel, and, on the other hand, in what could be called Jeff's desperate "nominalism" and his belief in the redemptive qualities of language (also a long-standing theme in DeLillo).

Screens make their appearance throughout the novel and always at crucial moments in Jeff's narrative of his time at the Convergence. The screens "appear in the halls and disappear into the ceiling. Last screen, last film, a self-immolation" (85). The hyperrealism of the screens is deeply disturbing for Jeff: "Then, up close, screen about to burst with flames that jump a stream and appear to spring into the camera and out toward the hallway where I stand watching" (121;

see also 152, 170 and 259). Jeff, however, is also aware of the digitality of the images with all the editing and simulative possibilities this contains: "It begins to occur to me that I may be seeing the same running cluster repeatedly, shot and reshot, two dozen runners made to resemble several hundred, a flawless sleight of editing… Is it possible that this is not factual documentation rendered in a selective manner but something radically apart? It's a digital weave, every fragment manipulated and enhanced, all of it designed, edited, redesigned… These were visual fictions, the wildfires and burning monks, digital bits, digital code, all of it computer-generated, none of it real" (152). (Digital) realism is thus a foregrounded theme of the novel itself, and in that respect it is certainly readable through a well-established (e.g. Baudrillardian) "postmodernist" lens. Digitality in *Zero K*, however, seems to play an even more complex role. In the "survival garden" scene, Jeff is confronted with the view (expressed by an enigmatic monk) that it is digital technology that allows for "disembodiment" in the first place: "Don't you see and feel these things more acutely than you used to? The perils and warnings? Something gathering, no matter how safe you may feel in your wearable technology. All the voice commands and hyper-connections that allow you to become disembodied" (127). Jeff increasingly comes to share this scepticism of digital technologies, their potential of disembodiment and control, "the numbing raptures of the Web" (167). What is most interesting, however, is that it is the Convergence ideologues and transhumanists themselves who do not trust digital technology, as Nadya Hrabal explains: "That world, the one above," she said, "is being lost to the systems. To the transparent networks that slowly occlude the flow of all those aspects of nature and character that distinguish humans from elevator buttons and doorbells… Those of you who will return to the surface. Haven't you felt it? The loss of autonomy. The sense of being virtualized. The devices you use… Do you ever feel unfleshed? All the coded impulses you depend on to guide you" (239). This Morpheus-like discourse, reminiscent of *The Matrix*, is mired in the idea of digitality as somehow disembodying while at the same time being "real" – in the sense that, as Morpheus explains Neo's bleeding once back from the virtual dojo: "The mind makes it real". In fact, what the Convergence seek through their cryogenic transcendence programme is nothing but the resurrection of the soul *and* the body (a very "Catholic" theme, present throughout DeLillo's work) even while they can only envisage this transubstantiation in digital terms, through digital technology – a technology, however, they cannot trust.

4. Conclusion – A Dark Yearning

> "It's only human to want to know more, and then more, and then more," I said. "But it's also true that what we don't know is what makes us human. And there's no end to knowing." (DeLillo, 2016: 131)

What might make DeLillo a posthumanist writer – in the same sense that postmodernist writers are critical and speculative commentators of postmodernity and the postmodern condition – is that, especially in his "postmillennial" work, he thematises ends, limits and transformations of the human (i.e. posthumanity) and produces counternarratives in the face of a media-technological process that might be referred to as "posthumanisation", in order to construct alternative truths about "our posthuman condition". In precisely this sense, however, DeLillo's work, especially *Point Omega* and *Zero K*, is representative of a *critical* posthumanism. One important aspect here is DeLillo's continuous critique of technology's promise "to free humans from material encumbrances" – an attitude that might place him and many other contemporary authors, in the context of a "return to the real" or forms of realisms. More importantly, however, it drives DeLillo towards embracing *speculative* realism as an important approach for contemporary (posthumanist) fiction – a view again already proposed by Tabbi:

> DeLillo's novels have always resisted the impulse to transcend their own materiality, not only in words but in the human body, in manufactured objects, even in the printed circuits of metal and silicon that make possible the seemingly weightless communications of modern electronics… DeLillo is no technophobe… As much as any contemporary writer, he has allowed his own language to play against the various languages of modern technology, to the point that he will often seem to disappear into the anonymous media that process the documents, photographs, sounds, and sights of contemporary culture. But these multiple texts are never wholly taken lightly; DeLillo never loses sight of the embodied reality beneath the information grid. (Tabbi, 1995: 206-207)

As a writer – and staunch defender of the (undoubtedly very humanist) medium of literary fiction and the novel more specifically, however – DeLillo has embraced and critically thematised "the posthuman" (and, quite predictably, has found it wanting). Inevitably, he has done so by providing counternarratives of its symptoms, but whether he has done justice to the posthuman *desire* is much more questionable. Located in the ambiguity between the "yearning for human potentiality" and the "frustration about human reality", posthumanism's own critical potential ultimately is denied by DeLillo's own (*neo*humanist) desire to "rehumanize, re-member and reinvent" (Herbrechter, 2009: 7). This can be seen in the ambiguous expression of

the role that DeLillo attributes to fiction itself: faced with the "vision of undying mind and body" (DeLillo, 2016: 242) and "science awash in irrepressible fantasy" (257), the writer's task is "to subvert the dance of transcendence" (242) even while he might not be able to "stifle [his] admiration" (257).

Bibliography:

Badmington, Neil, ed. (2000) *Posthumanism*, Houndmills: Palgrave.

Boxall, Peter (2015) "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman", in David James, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction Since 1945*, Cambridge: CUP, 127-42.

Boxall, Peter (2013) *Twenty-First –Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: CUP.

Boxall, Peter (2006) *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*, New York: Routledge.

Bradley, Arthur (2011) *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida*, Houndmills: Palgrave.

Braidotti, Rosi (2013) *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Callus, Ivan, and Stefan Herbrechter (2008) "What is a posthumanist reading?", *Angelaki* 13.1: 95-111.

Clarke, Bruce, and Manuela Rossini, eds. (2017) *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, Cambridge: CUP.

Colebrook, Claire, ed. (2012) *Extinction*, Living Books About Life, http://livingbooksaboutlife. org/books/Extinction.

Cowart, David (2012) "The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo's Point Omega", *Contemporary Literature* 53.1: 31-50.

DeLillo, Don (2016) *Zero K*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

DeLillo, Don (2010) *Point Omega*, London: Picador.

DeLillo, Don (2001) "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September", *The Guardian*, 22 December, available at: https://www.theguardian. com/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo (accessed 19/1/2017).

Dini, Rachele (2016) "Don DeLillo, Zero K", *European Journal of American Studies* (Reviews 2016-2); available online at: http://ejas.org/11393.

Grusin, Richard, ed. (2015) *The Nonhuman*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Herbrechter, Stefan (2013) *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, London: Bloomsbury.

Koepnick, Lutz (2014) *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Marshall, Kate (2015) "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time", *American Literary History* 27.3: 523-38.

Rosendahl Thomsen, Mads (2013) *The New Human in Literature: Posthuman Visions of Change in Body, Mind and Society after 1900*, London: Bloomsbury.

Schaberg, Christopher (2017) "Ecological Disorientation in Airline Ads and in DeLillo's *Zero K*", *ISLE* 24.1: 75-91.

Sheehan, Paul (2015) ""Posthuman Bodies", in David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, Cambridge: CUP, 245-60.

Tabb, Joseph (1995) *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Tulathimutte, Tony (2016) "Back to the Future: Don DeLillo's techno-prophetic novel hungers for tradition", *New Republic*, April 27; available online at: https://newrepublic.com/article/133004/don-delillo-back-future

Vermeulen, Pieter (2014) "Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*, the Anthropocene, and the Scales of Literature", *Studia Neophilologica*: 1-14; available online at: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00393274.2014.982356