13 Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and *Zero K* as 'Posthumanist Literature'

> [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.[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?[2]

Posthumanism, as a critical discourse,[3] is best understood as the ongoing 'deconstruction of humanism'.[4] 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 planet 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 ambient fears of extinction.[5] 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 inherent capacity to provoke imaginings of 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 the contents table of *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* 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.[6] In order to tap into the critical potential of posthumanist discourse and the figure of the posthuman it is therefore more productive to see them 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 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 speaking of (some) contemporary literature as a 'literature of the posthuman', in the

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[1] Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First –Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 14.

[2] Paul Sheehan, "Posthuman Bodies", in: David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 245.

[3] See Stefan Herbrechter, Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

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

[5] Cf. Claire Colebrook, ed. *Extinction* (Living Books About Life, 2012); available online at: http://livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Extinction (last accessed 18/12/2023).

[6] Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

sense that it faces a situation 'in which the human itself can only be contemplated from elsewhere, from some posthuman perspective'.[7]

With reference to this kind of contemporary literature most readers would probably expect to hear more 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'.[8] 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'.[9] There are questions raised by contemporary fiction that are at least as important as 'technological posthumanism', with its mutating, cloned techno-bodies and their threat or promise of informational dematerialisation and mediatisation. That does not mean of course that Paul Sheehan is wrong in seeing a parallel between the novel's contemporary 'post-generic' plasticity and the transformative potential of posthuman bodies.[10]

A somewhat more ambivalent approach, however, can be extracted from Peter Boxall's work. In his 'Science, Technology, and the Posthuman', 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".[11] 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".[12] The double-edged sword of technological extension (and originary technicity)[13] 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 post-war fiction:

> 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. [14]

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 the embrace of a

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[7] Peter Boxall, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman", in: James, David, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 127.
[8] Sheehan, "Posthuman Bodies", p. 245.
[9] *Ibid*., p. 250.
[10] Sheehan 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*).
[11] Boxall, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman", p. 127.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] Cf. Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2011).
[14] Boxall, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman", p. 130.

"postnatural body" (i.e. a tension or "splitting between a residual, natural human and a technologically produced posthuman", as Boxall argues.[15]

This posthumanisation process – accompanied and driven by neoliberal, technoscientific globalisation – does not go uncontested, however, as Boxall already noted in his *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* 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".[16] Posthumanism can thus be seen as the ideological battleground of an underlying political, economic, technological etc. process (that I would call (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.[17]

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" 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", Boxall writes.[18]

Don DeLillo

> Extinction was a current theme of his.[19]

Following on from this brief summary of Peter Boxall's compelling evaluation of contemporary literature, I am specifically interested in the role Don DeLillo's work plays in Boxall's argument. DeLillo's later 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 most recent novel, *Zero K*, DeLillo however, engages with the *question* of (a certain understanding of) posthumanism as such.

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".[20] 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

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[15] *Ibid*., p. 131.
[16] Boxall, *Twenty-First –Century Fiction*, p. 9.
[17] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[18] *Ibid*., pp. 12-13.
[19] Don DeLillo, Don. *Point Omega* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 25.
[20] Boxall, *Twenty-First –Century Fiction*, p 25.

drastic failure of the bonds that hold us in time and space".[21] Instead, they suggest a new technological-economic complex, with *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist* in particular "set in this peculiarly slowed, stalled time".[22] Boxall continues by claiming that DeLillo's first novels of the twenty-first century (i.e. after 9/11) "are written in a strikingly new spirit, a suddenly sparse, late style which displays an extraordinary historical disorientation",[23] which leads him to conclude that DeLillo might be a kind of test case for the transition from late postmodernism 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".[24] DeLillo's late work is thus both symptom and critique of this change and, as a writer, DeLillo is here positioned both as *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". It is in this way that DeLillo's late work can be said to continue to "wrestle with the task of finding a politically relevant role for literature".[25]

Already in 2006, DeLillo had played a key role for Boxall in articulating this transition beyond postmodernism, in *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",[26] DeLillo's novels, Boxall argued, "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".[27] 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', Boxall claims that 'possibility' is thus kept alive in the 'thin air of the 'end of history'".[28] In this sense, DeLillo's fiction is not simply "an enactment of the exhaustion of [historical] possibility",[29] but, in Boxall's view, it is rather "at once a critique and an enactment of the possibility of fiction in the post-war" period as such, underpinned by an unnameable longing or "yearning for something that is missing", or, as one might argue, the "unrealised" in history,

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[21] *Ibid*., p. 27.

[22] *Ibid*. On the issue of timescapes, the "expansion of temporal scales" and the "limits of temporality" in DeLillo's post 9/11 novels see also James Gourley, *Terrorism and Temporality in the Works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 85-94, and David Watson, "Vanishing Points; or, the Timescapes of the Contemporary Novel", *Studia Neophilologica* 88.sup 1 (2016): 57-67.

[23] Boxall, *Twenty-First –Century Fiction*, p. 28.

[24] *Ibid*., pp. 29-30. On the question of DeLillo's 'late style' see Aine Mahon and Fergal McHugh, "Lateness and the Inhospitable in Stanley Cavell and Don DeLillo", *Philosophy and Literature* 40.2 (2016): 446-464; Matthew Shipe, "War as Haiku: The Politics of Don DeLillo's Late Style", *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon* 4.2 (2016): 1-23; and Laura Bieger, "Say the Words: Reading for Cohesion in Don DeLillo's Novel *Point Omega*". *Narrative* 26.1 (2018): 1-16.

[25] Frida Beckman, "Cartographies of ambivalence: allegory and cognitive mapping in Don DeLillo's later novels", *Textual Practice* 32.8 (2018): 1385.

[26] Peter Boxall Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 5.

[28] *Ibid*.

[29] *Ibid*., p. 8.

"which allows thought and history to persist".[30] However, while this places DeLillo's work at a critical angle to the general understanding of what postmodernism is or was, it also positions him at a critical distance to what is generally understood by the posthuman (if not posthumanism), namely the progressive (techno-utopian) displacement or replacement of the human by media and technology. Instead, as Boxall argues, the dogged insistence on, or the preservation of "the possibility of fiction", that characterises DeLillo's work, is indeed achieved through a 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".[31]

In turning towards narrating the accelerated and intensifying posthumanisation occurring in 'late' (postmodernist, posthumanist, contemporary) culture, DeLillo thus finds a new role for literature, the writer of fiction and the literary critic in the new (21st) century. As I would like to argue, this role is 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 his interview "In the ruins of the future", where he criticises what he calls "the utopian glow of 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".[32] DeLillo here sees a (*neo*humanist, or rehumanising) task for the writer of fiction in providing a counternarrative to the combination of posthumanising technology and its associated forms of 'nostalgic' terrorism to rise from 'the ruins of the future'. This neohumanist counternarrative in the face of technology and terrorism, however, has been at the heart of DeLillo's oeuvre for a much longer time, as Joseph Tabbi demonstrated (already 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 [or, one could say, posthumanist] or conceptual naturalism".[33] Tabbi here 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.[34] Taking this further, 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", Tabbi suggests.[35]

Point Omega *and* Zero K – *A "Posthumanist Reading"*[36]

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[30] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[31] *Ibid*., pp. 6-7.
[32] Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September", *The Guardian* (22 December 2001); available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo (last accessed 18/12/2023).
[33] Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 174.
[34] *Ibid*., p. 185.
[35] *Ibid*.
[36] Cf. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "What is a posthumanist reading?" *Angelaki* 13.1 (2008): 95-111.

> 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.[37]

The best way to understand *contemporary* literature and culture as posthumanist, 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.[38] It is an ontological, epistemological and ecological crisis that could lead either to radical extinction and ecocide or total control through technological 'enhancement' and 'geoengineering'. This is the major faultline between posthumanists and transhumanists with their different ideologies, strategies and constructions of the future. In terms of recent developments in (critical and cultural) theory, this is reflected in the various positions with regard to posthumanism's immediate predecessors – poststructuralism and postmodernism – and their 'de-centring' of the (human) subject. If regarded through the lens of continuity with previous 'post' movements, *post*humanism could be understood as another, more radical phase in this decentring process of the human, or even as the most radical 'turn' in theory yet – i.e. the 'nonhuman turn'[39]– which is based on the notion that 'postanthropocentrism' is to be taken seriously. However, for those who see the decentring of the (human) subject in a more sceptical or negative way – an offense to human dignity and solidarity – postanthropocentrism is certainly a turn too far, which explains the numerous 'returns', backlashes and *neo*humanist tendencies that also characterise the first decades of the 21st century. Accompanying and increasingly overtaking this ideologically framed discussion are *trans*humanist trends that, in fact, just press ahead with human self-substitution, which they characterise as the evolutionary 'next stage' (usually the advent of strong AI), informed as they are 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 social and political context in which DeLillo's more recent work, and especially *Point Omega* and *Zero K.*, have to be read.

Kate Marshall begins her inquiry into what she refers to as the "novels of the Anthropocene" with a quotation from DeLillo's *Point Omega* that sets the scene for such a reading: "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"[40] The character, Richard Elster, who speaks these words is a disaffected 'metaphysician' and former Bush government war 'ideologue' specialising in the question of (extraordinary) 'rendition'.[41] 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" that may be referred to as "speculative fiction" and which correspond to the

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

[38] I.e. the Anthropocene; see Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* and *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

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

[40] Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene?" citing DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 67.

[41] Cf. Mark Osteen, "Extraordinary Renditions: DeLillo's *Point Omega* and Hitchcock's *Psycho*", *Clues – A Journal of Detection* 31.1 (2013):103-113.

"speculative realism" often associated with the nonhuman turn in critical and cultural theory, as she explains.[42]

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" and which answers to "an evolving grammar of dread".[43] *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.[44]

Elster, as the representative of a new postanthropocentric cosmology recalling Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the *point omega* and the *noosphere*, is a disenchanted humanities academic and ex-advisor to the Bush administration over its Gulf War strategy, who voices his misanthropic disaffection with humanity by claiming: "We want to be the dead matter we used to be. We're the last billionth of a second in the evolution of matter".[45] 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 ultimately rejects as 'uninteresting', however. 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".[46]

A key feature in *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", as Cowart refers to it) is an extremely slowed-down projection of Hitchcock's movie *Psycho* (1960) and is itself connected to the paleo-ontological theme of species disappearance, deceleration and deep time geology in the novel: "it was like watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years", as the narrator

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[42] Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene?", pp. 524 and 537.

[43] David Cowart, "The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo's Point Omega", *Contemporary Literature* 53.1 (2012): 31 and 36; on DeLillo's "fascination with deserts and death" see also Laura Barrett, "'Radiance in dailiness': The Uncanny Ordinary in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*", *Journal of Modern Literature* 42.1 (2018): 106-123.

[44] Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *The New Human in Literature: Posthuman Visions of Change in Body, Mind and Society after 1900* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 199.

[45] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 64.

[46] Rosendahl Thomsen, *The New Human in Literature*, p. 188.

explains.[47] *Point Omega* and its lack of pace plays a prominent part in Lutz Koepnick's study *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*, which includes DeLillo's novel within a "contemporary poetic of slow writing and reading":[48] "*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", Koepnick claims.[49] 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".[50] 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".[51] The effect is one of opening up a space for slowness amidst "our accelerated movements through screen culture": "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".[52] In doing so, "like Gordon's frames, DeLillo's sentences inch toward the monadic and static" and offer "an interface across what exceeds the neoliberal stress of self-management", as Koepnick explains.[53]
Pieter Vermeulen summarises this stylistic effect in *Point Omega* in the following words:

> 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";[54] 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.[55]

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". However, 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",[56] or simply to "experience what exceeds and denies experience".[57] And for the filmmaker Finley and his project, this desire, or Elster's search for deep time, can only be rendered by an "extreme long-take cinematography":

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[47] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 59.
[48] Lutz Koepnick, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 254.
[49] *Ibid*., p. 262.
[50] *Ibid*., p. 273.
[51] *Ibid., p. 275.*
[52] *Ibid*.
[53] *Ibid*., p. 277.
[54] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 4.
[55] Pieter Vermeulen, "Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*, the Anthropocene, and the Scales of Literature", *Studia Neophilologica* 87 (2015): 73.
[56] Koepnick, *On Slowness*, p. 270.
[57] *Ibid.*

> 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.[58]

Koepnick, in fact, 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.[59]

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 when faced with the enormity of prehuman geological deep time and the posthuman acceleration of 'machinic speed'.[60]

Point Omega plays a similarly prominent role in Pieter Vermeulen's excellent essay on "the Anthropocene and the scales of literature",[61] even while he adds another, more sceptical, layer to the question of posthumanism and/in 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",[62] Vermeulen reminds us that the question of "scaling up" the 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 unrecognisability. Vermeulen, more specifically, uses *Point Omega* to show that "globalization merges with other decidedly non- or post-human powers", a process which constitutes a "move beyond the temporality of trauma, and its foreclosure of global extension, to the nonhuman vastness of *geological* time".[63] The challenge is how to make this vastness visible to the 'human' eye of the reader? For Vermeulen, *Point Omega* is crucial in this context precisely in that it shows how the "impact of nonhuman otherness on human life (…) strains the limits of the novel form".[64] DeLillo's novel in fact stages a confrontation with the limits of human imagination, 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

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[58] Koepnick, *On Slowness*, p. 271.
[59] *Ibid*., p. 272.
[60] On the question of deep time and posthumanism see my *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality*; and "Posthumanism and Deep Time", in: Herbrechter et al., eds., *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (Cham: Springer, 2022), pp. 29-54.
[61] Vermeulen, "Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*, the Anthropocene, and the Scales of Literature".
[62] *Ibid*., p. 69.
[63] *Ibid*., p. 70.
[64] *Ibid*., p. 71.

can be considered as limitations on the novel's ability to abandon conventional realisms and imagine the geological ramifications of culture", Vermeulen argues.[65]

Point Omega can thus be understood as 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",[66] we, humans, have become interested in the "force of geologic time" (*PO* 24), where the desert has become a "protoworld", as well as an "alien being" *and* "science fiction" (*PO* 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" (*PO* 91), as Elster reveals. Waiting for point omega to arrive ("the point of waiting just to be waiting" (*PO* 60), "witnessing the last flare of human thought" (*PO* 65) when "brute matter becomes analytical human thought" (*PO* 66), desiring the "paroxysm" (*PO* 92). However, despite all his inhuman disaffection, when Elster, the spokesperson of posthumanism in the novel, faces the idea that his daughter might have been abducted and killed, and as he returns from his desert retreat to civilisation and the city, he turns, as the narrator says, "inconsolably human" (*PO* 121) again. The poignancy of this verdict lies in the fact that there is probably no better way of explaining the ambiguity of 'our' posthuman situation: human, all too human. Literature, meanwhile, is staring into the ruins of the future and almost helplessly keeps reminding itself of the impossibility of its task, namely, to quote Elster one last time: "to cure the terror of time" (*PO* 57).

DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) further adds to the motif of devastation and human disintegration. It is a novel that "intimates a failing species on a threatened planet".[67] However, DeLillo here shifts the perspective from a slow 'geological' posthumanism to the frantic transhumanist fantasies of human life extension, especially through 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 can be said to be "foils, representing two competing visions of a human being, not to mention DeLillo's competing impulses as a writer", as Tony Tulathimutte explains.[68] 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'.[69] Jeffrey, on the other hand might stand in for "the Enlightenment

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[65] *Ibid*., p. 77.

[66] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 45, further references are given in the text as *PO*.

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

[68] Tony Tulathimutte, "Back to the Future: Don DeLillo's techno-prophetic novel hungers for tradition", *New Republic* (27 April 2016); available online at: https://newrepublic.com/article/133004/don-delillo-back-future (last accessed 18/12/2023).

[69] For a detailed discussion see Alexandra Glavanakova, "The Age of Humans Meets Posthumanism: Reflections on Don DeLillo's *Zero K*", *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 50.1 (2017): 91-109; and Sherryl, *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First-Century Speculative Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 25-45; and Carmen Laguarta-Bueno, "Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016): Transhumanism, Trauma, and the Ethics of Premature Cryopreservation", in: Sonia Baelo-Allué and Mónica Calvo-Pascual, eds., *Transhumanism and Posthumanism in Twenty-First Century Narrative: Perspectives on the Non-Human in Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 126-141. The depiction of cryopreservation in DeLillo's novel even made it into a bioethics paper by George J. Annas and Michael A Grondin based at the Boston University School of Public Health that is interestingly not

humanist, a book-lover as much concerned with the death of the humanities as with the death of humanity":[70]

> [Jeffrey] 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.[71]

In another review, by Rachele Dini, *Zero K* serves as a further example of DeLillo's "speculative turn – from historiography to futurography" characteristic of his postmillennial writing.[72] It displays a linguistic sparseness and a continued "faith in the physical" (i.e. human bodies), which is part of DeLillo's "reclaiming [of] matter" and used for the "crafting [of an alternative] future", according to Dini.[73]

Thus, after speculating on posthumanist themes like deep time, climate change and extinction in *Point Omega*, DeLillo, in *Zero K*, takes on the techno-utopian dimension of posthumanism – or transhumanism, to be more precise.[74] DeLillo's work, like that of many of his contemporaries as well, has of course always been concerned with 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 entanglement in contemporary techno-capitalist, globalised, neoliberal society), without strictly being classifiable as a science fiction novel, however. Instead, *Zero K* openly thematises the role of techno-utopianism and techno-dystopianism and, in fact, seems to be sceptical of both. At the same time, it also bears many traits of 'cli-fi' (climate change fiction) already apparent in *Point Omega*. In this sense, DeLillo 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 is: "Everybody wants to own the end of the world";[75] it is the first, and almost the last sentence of the novel (*ZK* 274). It expresses the exhaustion and cynicism of capitalism's ultimate phase, which goes as far as to claim ownership and anticipate the consumption of its own apocalyptic end – the apocalyptic logic

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so much critical of its speculative character or its feasibility but the issues of social equality it raises. Cf. Annas and Grondin, "Frozen Ethics: Melting the Boundaries Between Medical Treatment and Organ Procurement", *The American Journal of Bioethics* 17.5 (2017): 22-24.

[70] On death and "deathlessness", see Nathan Ashman, "'Death Itself Shall Be Deathless': Transnationalism and Eternal Death in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60.3 (2019): 300-320.

[71] Tulathimutte, "Back to the Future: Don DeLillo's techno-prophetic novel hungers for tradition", n.p.

[72] Rachele Dini, "Don DeLillo, Zero K", *European Journal of American Studies*. Reviews 2 (2016): 1; available online at: https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11393 (last accessed 18/12/2023).

[73] *Ibid*., p. 2.

[74] See also Erik Cofer, "Owning the end of the world: *Zero K* and DeLillo's post-postmodern mutation", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59.4 (2018): 459-470.

[75] Don DeLillo, *Zero K* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), p. 3; further references are given in the text as *ZK*.

and vision on which it has been thriving and which provides it with its current form of 'zombie' survival. Within this cynical system, Ross stands for the (privileged) individual who wants to survive (or 'own') death as a final commodity, even if that means that he might have to bring forward its eventuality, i.e. by inducing death for the sake of ensuring a 'controlled cryopreservation').

The idea that every death of an individual is the death of an entire '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' one's humanity, its ultimate 'sharedness'. While his son Jeffery mocks the idea of Ross's "faith-based technology" (*ZK* 8), Ross asks him to "respect the idea" (*ZK* 10). To Ross's discredit, however, the narrator does not fail to note 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 city in Russia, North of Kazakhstan, probably best known for a meteorite that exploded in the sky above it, in 2013, 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 own cryopreservation procedure in order to bring his 'worldly affairs' in order when he returns to 'city life'. While the first part 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 town in Eastern Ukraine that is very much at the centre of current historical development: it is 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 meditative reflection of the kind one might project onto 'cryopreserved mind activity'. Artis – the impersonated posthuman (body) artist so to speak muses over the disembodied identity of a "Woman's body in a pod" (*ZK* 162). The two main parts stand in a relation of both contrast and continuity. Themes that span across are the role the digital (and screen media more specifically) plays in the contemporary human 'identity crisis', which is also connected to the well-established problematic of language and reality in DeLillo's work. The more specifically posthuman or, rather, transhuman theme of 'dis/embodiment' (the mind-body split) and the role of technology in overcoming death, however, is discussed in two major speeches made by Convergence ideologues, the Stenmark Twins in Part 1 (*ZK* 61-78) and Nadja Hrabal in Part 2 (*ZK* 238-246). A third major theme is 'time, timelessness and futurity', announced in the already quoted first sentence of the novel – "Everybody wants to own the end of the world" (*ZK* 3).

What both the *trans*humanist and the (*neo*)humanist voices in the novel compete for is thus what might be called 'futurity', or the right to determine future reality which, in turn, is used to legitimate actions that are designed to 'construct' that very future (in particular, the future of 'humanity'). It is science-fictional politics, *literally*, which is the only politics still available in late modernity. From a *trans*humanist perspective, one might argue, the question concerning human futurity, as Ross muses, 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?' (*ZK* 68). What places the novel firmly within the context of the current discussion about the figure of the posthuman, as well

as within the question 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: "I wasn't only his son, I was *the* son, the survivor, the heir apparent" (*ZK* 255). His main role, as first person narrator, is thus that of the survivor, the lone witness: "This was my role, to watch whatever they put in front of me" (*ZK* 139). His main concern is therefore a fundamentally 'realist' one, namely, how to bear witness to 'futurity' – arguably the main challenge of contemporary speculative) fiction – or, how to address the fundamental contradiction buried in the phrase '*speculative* realism'.[76] This is articulated in the novel at two levels: on the one hand, the fight over time, futurity and reality, 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, *ZK* 135), in the time of Cheylabinsk, i.e. in 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" (*ZK* 237), which is the only hope of creating a sense of 'alternative futurity', as Jeff is being told: "They're making the future. A new idea of the future. Different from the others" (*ZK* 30). The "heralds" – people like Artis and Ross, who 'die' before their time – to some extent resemble the (modernist or futurist) avant-garde artist. Jeff, on the other hand, upon his return to 'the world hum' of 'real' (i.e. historical) life, is taken over by his profound distrust of anything digital. He comes to see what he witnessed at the Convergence as a "plunge into prehistory" (*ZK* 226). For him, the cryogenised human bodies are like "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' (*ZK* 256).[77]

One interesting aspect of the Convergence, however, is its somewhat ambiguous relationship to the digital, which it seems to accept as a technology but also wishes to expel or reject as an ontology. Inside the compound the atmosphere is (apart from big screens and medical equipment) "Precambrian" (*ZK* 20), the rooms are "not fitted with digital connections" (*ZK* 20), even though "elaborate cyber-defense" is evidently a vital part of the future-proofing of the entire cryopreservation venture (*ZK* 30). This repression of the digital coincides with Jeff's own distrust, which gains in strength as the novel progresses. Digitalisation is a theme that DeLillo has been engaging with in most of his novels. In *Zero K*, one could argue, 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 or "matter-realist" view of technology (as Braidotti calls it).[78] Early on in the novel, Artis – the transhumanist body artist par excellence – expresses her 'bio-constructivist' view of perception and reality in very similar terms:

> 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

[76] On speculative fiction see Sherryl Vint, "Posthumanism and Speculative Fiction", in: Stefan Herbrechter et al., eds., *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (Cham: Springer, 2022), pp. 225-246; and Pieter Vermeulen, "The End of the Novel", in: Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann, eds., *New Approaches to the Twenty-First Century Anglophone Novel* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 317-336.

[77] On the obvious connection here to questions of embodiment and DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001) see Boxall, "A Leap Out of Our Biology: History, Tautology, and Biomatter in Don DeLillo's Later Fiction", *Contemporary Literature* 58.4 (2017): 526-555.

[78] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), pp. 158-59.

> 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. (*ZK* 45)

Artis also speaks of her experience of a new vision after surgery on her right eye, twelve years before. Now, she projects her enhanced vision onto 'futurity' (which also embraces someaspects of posthumanist 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?" (*ZK* 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 well-established theme in DeLillo's work).

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" (*ZK* 85). Jeff finds the hyperrealism of the screens deeply disturbing: "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" (*ZK* 121; see also pp. 152, 170 and 259). However, he 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" (*ZK* 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, plays a more complex role. In the "survival garden" scene, Jeff is confronted with the view (expressed by an enigmatic monk) that digital technology is the precondition for the (transhumanist, cryogenic idea of) '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" (*ZK* 127). Jeff increasingly comes to share this scepticism of digital, connected and networked (or, converging) technologies with their potential of disembodiment and control, "the numbing raptures of the Web" (*ZK* 167). What is most interesting, however, is that the Convergence ideologues and transhumanists themselves do not trust digital technology in the hands of the technocapitalist system, as Nadya Hrabal explains: "That world, the one above (…) 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" (*ZK* 239). This discourse is mired in the idea of digitality as somehow disembodying while at the same time being '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 really trust.

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". (*ZK* 131)

What might thus make DeLillo a 'posthumanist' writer – in the same sense that writers who are critical and speculative commentators of postmodernity and the postmodern condition may be called 'postmodernist' – is that, especially in his 'postmillennial' work, he thematises ends, limits and transformations of the human. He thus engages with the spectre of 'posthumanity' and produces counternarratives in the face of a media-technological process that might be referred to as 'posthumanisation'. He does so in order to construct alternative truths about 'our' posthuman condition. In precisely this sense, 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 misguided 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 a new realism. More specifically, however, DeLillo could be said to embrace *speculative* realism as an important approach for contemporary (posthumanist) fiction – a view, once more, already anticipated 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.[79]

As a writer – and staunch defender of the (undoubtedly still 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 its figurations wanting). Inevitably, he has done so by providing counternarratives of its symptoms, but whether he has done justice to posthuman *desire* is questionable. Located in the ambiguity between the 'yearning for human potentiality' and the 'frustration about human reality', posthumanism's critical potential ultimately is denied by DeLillo's very own (*neo*humanist) desire to "rehumanize, re-member and reinvent".[80] This can be seen in the ambiguous role DeLillo attributes to fiction itself: faced with the "vision of undying mind and body" (*ZK* 242) and "science awash in irrepressible fantasy" (*ZK* 257), the writer's task, DeLillo or at least his

[79] Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, pp. 206-207.
[80] Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, p. 7.

narrator claims, is "to subvert the dance of transcendence" (*ZK* 242) even while he might not be able to "stifle [his] admiration" (*ZK* 257). This is a stance, however, that might no longer be quite available as speculative (realist) fiction is sucked into the neoliberal transhumanist imaginary.

Postscript: Don Delillo's The Silence[81]

Don DeLillo's work has a long history of 'unclassifiability', as neither (late) modernist nor postmodernist,[82] and as a critical and often cynical commentary of contemporary American culture based on media mass consumption, environmental decline and a highly ambivalent attitude towards humans' increasing dependence on technology and screen media.[83] As one of his most astute and consistent commentators, Peter Boxall, writes: "DeLillo's fiction suggests a deep underlying connection between technology, violence and capital, a connection which undermines the possibility of historical progression".[84] Together with what Joe Tabbi called DeLillo's aesthetic "talent of self-effacement", DeLillo's choice of "media and technological systems (…) as sublime objects of contemplation"[85] therefore opens up possibilities of reading his work from a posthumanist point of view or maybe of even seeing him as a 'posthumanist' author.

DeLillo's "pared-back late style" in his novellas since *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Point Omega* (2010), with their "desert sparseness" and "bare-skinned narratives",[86] has been associated with a new literary phase of "post-postmodernism".[87] His late work appears to oscillate

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[81] This section was first published online as "Don DeLillo's (The) Silence", *The Genealogy of the Posthuman* (2021); available at: https://criticalposthumanism.net/delillos-the-silence/ (accessed 18/12/2023).

[82] Cf. for example Paul Giaimo, *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer's Work* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), p. 20; or Peter Knight, who is uncertain whether DeLillo's writing is "a symptom, a diagnosis, or an endorsement of the condition of postmodernity", in Knight, "DeLillo, Postmodernism, Postmodernity", in: John N. Duvall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 27.

[83] See Randy Laist, *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), as well as Anthony Miccoli's consideration of Don DeLillo in *Posthuman Suffering and the Technological Embrace* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010).

[84] Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 7. See also Elise A. Martucci, *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Boxall "DeLillo and Media Culture", in: John N. Duvall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, pp. 43-52.

[85] Joseph Tabbi, *The Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 173.

[86] Cf. Katherine de Cunha Lewin and Kiron Ward, "Introduction: A trick of the light: Don DeLillo in the twenty-first century", in: Lewin and Ward, eds., *Don DeLillo: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 3; and Peter Boxall's "Interview: The edge of the future: A discussion with Don DeLillo", in the same volume, p. 160. On DeLillo's "late style" see also Matthew Shipe , "War's Haiku: The Politics of Don DeLillo's Late Style", *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon* 4.2 (5) (2016): 1-23; and Aine Mahon and Fergal McHugh, "Lateness and the Inhospitable in Stanley Cavell and Don DeLillo", *Philosophy and Literature* 40.2 (2016): 446-464.

[87] Cf. David Cowart, "The DeLillo Era: Literary Generations in the Postmodern Period", in: Peter Schneck and Philipp Schweighäuser, eds., *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction: Transatlantic Perspectives on Don DeLillo* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 223; as well as Julia Breitenbach, *Analog Fictions for the*

between urban and desert-like "post-human landscapes",[88] and between "flesh and code".[89] Thus, even if they do not display "a grand vision of a trans- or posthuman reality", DeLillo's narratives are driven by posthumanist "desires" like "becoming one with nature or the universe, and ceasing to be human". [90] While human self-abandonment in the face of the desert and deep geological time is foregrounded in *Point Omega*,[91] loss of human self-control and the technological "leap out of biology"[92] is the main topic of DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016, as seen above.[93]

DeLillo's most recent novella, *The Silence*,[94] continues to illustrate DeLillo's conviction that "we depend on disaster to consolidate our vision"; however, it also (still) contains the hope that "fiction is all about reliving things. It is our second chance", in DeLillo's words.[95] It is also, like all of his novels since 2001, still very much written with a sensibility of a future that is "in ruins".[96] The novella deals with the imminent danger of collapse of our increasingly digital lives, as Craig Hubert characterises the plot in his review:

> The skeletal premise of *The Silence* – a near fatal plane crash, a Super Bowl party upended by the television screen going blank, followed by a series of digital connections quickly being wiped out – is simply constructed to allow the characters to end up in the same apartment, to be part of the same swirling conversation, to make sense of what is happening in their heads and in the outside world. For DeLillo, the difference between the two is often tenuous.[97]

Digital Age: Litertary Realism and Photographic Discourses in Novels after 2000 (Rochester: Camden House, 2012), pp. 3ff.

[88] Cf. Clara Sarmento, "The Angel in a Country of Last Things: DeLillo, Auster, and the Post-human Landscape", *Arcadia* 41 (2006): 147-159.

[89] Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *The New Human in Literature*, p. 191.

[90] *Ibid*., pp. 198-199.

[91] Cf. Lutz Koepnick's reading of *Point Omega* in Koepnick, *On Slowness*, pp. 249-279 discussed at length above, as well as Pieter Vermeulen's, "Don DeLillo's Point Omega, the Anthropocene, and the Scales of Literature", and David Watson, "Vanishing Points; or, the Timescapes of the Contemporary American Novel".

[92] Cf. Peter Boxall, "A Leap Out of Biology: History, Tautology, and Biomatter in Don DeLillo's Later Fiction".

[93] See Alexandra Glavanakova, "The Age of Humans Meets Posthumanism: Reflections on Don DeLillo's *Zero K*", and Erik Cofer, "Owning the end of the world: *Zero K* and DeLillo's post-postmodern mutation".

[94] Don DeLillo, *The Silence* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

[95] Don DeLillo, "The Power of History", *New York Times* (7 September 1997); available online: https://movies2.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html (accessed 18/12/2023).

[96] Cf. DeLillo's well-known post-9/11 piece "In the ruins of the future", *The Guardian* (22 December 2001); available online: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo (accessed 18/12/2023).

[97] Craig Hubert, "Don DeLillo's *The Silence* Imagines the Death of Tech", *The Observer* (23 October 2020); available online at: https://observer.com/2020/10/the-silence-don-delillo-review/ (accessed 18/12/2023).

The "digital shutdown", *The Silence* portrays, according to Alex Preston, appears like an attempt by DeLillo to "bring Samuel Beckett into the Facebook age".[98] What could be described as "our tragedy of forgetting" in our increasing dependence on our externalised (hypermnemetic) digital devices, platforms and networks is shown in *The Silence*'s apocalyptic absurdity as the ultimate communication breakdown: "What began as a dialogue, gathered energy as trialogue, and peaked as a pentalogue, soon topples like a Babel tower and disperses into monologues of unconsoled dissociation: five separate 'friends' unable to communicate, unable to connect, unable even to remember, nattering to themselves like lunatics, haunting the hallways, counting the stairs".[99] In *The Silence*'s own words: "When a missing fact emerges without digital assistance, each person announces it to the other while looking off into a remote distance, the otherworld of what was known and lost" (*TS* 14-15). The insistent puzzlement and fascination with the "blank screen" – "What is it hiding from us?" (*TS* 28) – in the experience of "systems failure" (*TS* 34), is like staring into a "black hole" – the object and "event horizon" of Albert Einstein's obsession, who serves as a constant reference – and which is bringing down "world civilization" (*TS* 35). Humans have become "digital addicts (…) engrossed, mesmerized, consumed by the device" (*TS* 99).

It would take too long to fully show to what extent *The Silence* is engaging with what have come to be known as posthumanist motifs. Here is merely a short overview: human vulnerability in the face of ubiquitous surveillance and face recognition; the loss of 'our' sense of reality through increasing 'virtualisation'; an artificial intelligence that "betrays who we are and how we live and think" (*TS* 68); the extension of war into cyberspace, biotechnology and "drone wars" (*TS* 92); the increasingly invasive cyborgisation of our bodies ("Do a select number of people have a form of phone implanted in their bodies?" (*TS* 80, 82), "Have our minds been digitally remastered?" (TS 88)); human obsolescence ("We're being zombified (…) We're being bird-brained" (*TS* 84), with only "human slivers" remaining (*TS* 90)). In sum, *The Silence* covers our ambient eco-technological catastrophism ("Plastics, microplastics. In our air, our water, our food" (*TS* 94)) and our "end-of-the-world movie" (*TS* 104).

The idea of a "global silence" after the breakdown of (communication) technology makes its explicit appearance on p. 80 of *The Silence*. It hints at a 'post-technological' silence that threatens to engulf the human and its entire 'world'. As a writer, however, DeLillo is also concerned in another way with the (global as well as individual, personal) breakdown of communication and its (presumed) ensuing silence. His own imminent silence (every piece of writing, at least from a certain age onwards, is a writing against the silence that must follow death), as well as, much more worryingly for any writer, the silence 'after' literature, or the silence that literature imagines after itself – i.e. the world ending in silence (without 'us', and without any literature to witness our demise, no survivor to read and remember the human, nothing at all). This strangest of visions is, however, nothing new. In a sense, *The Silence* can be seen as the latest example of what Ihab Hassan, in 1967, speaking from the apocalyptic

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[98] Alex Preston, "*The Silence* by Don DeLillo review – Beckett for the Facebook age", *The Guardian* (27 October 2020); available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/27/the-silence-by-don-delillo-review-beckett-for-the-facebook-age (accessed 18/12/2023).

[99] This is Joshua Cohen's vivid description, cf. Cohen, "In Don DeLillo's New Novel, Technology Is Dead. Civilization Might Be, Too", *The New York Times* (20 October 2020); available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/20/books/review/don-delillo-the-silence.html (accessed 18/12/2023).

vantage point of another (but still very much relevant) extinction threat, called "the literature of silence".[100]

It is no surprise that the paradox of a writing that survives its own end by, or in writing, anticipating it, (re)enacting it, so to speak, might return with a vengeance in our so-called 'posthuman times'. DeLillo says as much in his interview with Peter Boxall, where he evokes the idea of a "novel without humans", a novel "writing itself":

> The novel in the embrace of new technologies will be the novel that writes itself. Will there still be the lone individual seated in a room trying to create a narrative that is equal to the advancing realities of the world around us? It may be that the fragile state of the planet will summon a new kind of novel with a language that alters our perceptions (…). Will advancing technology revitalize human consciousness or drown it forever?[101]

There is just one snag in DeLillo's (and literature's) ongoing dialectic of exhaustion and (self)replenishment:[102] only a human(ist) would (want to) imagine the world after them as 'silent'. It most certainly will be anything but…

[100] Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967). For a commentary, see Herbrechter, *Lawrence Durrell, Postmodernism and the Ethics of Alterity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 192-221.

[101] DeLillo, in: Boxall, "Interview: The edge of the future: A discussion with Don DeLillo", p. 164.

[102] See John Barth's seminal pieces: Barth, *The Literature of Exhaustion and The Literature of Replenishment* (Northridge: Lord John Press, 1982).