


'Why not follow our words bodily into the future tense?': Life, death and posthuman bodies in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*

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The overarching problem foregrounded by the novel is how human mortality should be treated in the face of the inexorability of death, as well as the human desire for immortality. From the investigation of the role that the human body and self and life and death play in *Zero K*, it is evident that there is, in fact, evidence of a posthumanist framework: from technological practices (the body and cryonic freezing) and ethics (*Zero K* and Ross's decision), to aesthetics (ways of seeing and the role of art). The aim of this article is to read Don DeLillo's *Zero K* within the framework of the posthuman, specifically focusing on the following central aspects of the novel: the role of the human body and the concept of the posthuman; the relationship between the self, the body and language; death and the challenges of posthumanism; and the relationship between ways of seeing, art and death. The starting point is to explore how the literature, particularly fiction, creates a richer and more complex notion of the contexts and issues arising from the idea of the posthuman and/or new human.

Keywords: *Zero K*; Don DeLillo; life or death; posthumanism; posthuman bodies; body and language; art; ways of seeing.

Introduction

In Don DeLillo's latest novel, *Zero K* (2016), the question that is ultimately posed, is '... what happens to a single human body when the forces of death and life join?' – thus, implying a radical rethinking of the dominant, familiar humanist account of who 'we' are as human beings and who we may be as immortal beings. The aim of this article is to read DeLillo's (2016) *Zero K* within the framework of posthumanism, specifically focusing on the following central aspects of the novel: the concept of the posthuman and the role of the human body; the relationship between the self, the body and language; death and the challenges of posthumanism; and the relationship between ways of seeing, art and death. The starting point of this study is to explore how literature, particularly fiction, creates a richer and more complex notion of the contexts and issues arising from the idea of the posthuman and/or new human, following Nayar's (2014) statement that literary texts:

[H]ave since the Renaissance always shown us how humans behave, react and interact – indeed it has been said that literature 'invented' the human – have now begun to show that the human is what it is *because* it includes the non-human. (p. 10)

Nayar (2014) distinguished between two frames for the term *posthumanism*. On the one hand, it:

[M]erely refers to an *ontological condition* in which many humans now, and increasingly will, live with chemically, surgically, technologically modified bodies and/or in close conjunction (networked) with machines and other organic forms (such as body parts from other life forms through xenotransplantation). (pp. 11–12)

Posthumanism, on the other hand, and especially in its *critical* avatar, is also a new *conceptualization* of the human. Badmington (2011) explained that posthumanism:

[B]egins with the recognition that 'Man' is not the privileged and protected center, because humans are no longer – and perhaps never were – utterly distinct from animals and machines, are the products of historical and cultural differences that make any appeal to universal essence impossible, are constituted as subjects by a linguistic order that pre-exists and transcends them, and are unable to direct the course of world history toward a supreme, uniquely human goal. (n.p.)

Both conceptualisations of posthumanism imply a radical rethinking of the dominant, familiar humanist account of who 'we' – as human beings – are. And, according to DeLillo's (2016) latest

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novel, *Zero K*, who we *might become* as immortal beings. The novel deals with the techno-scientific practice and rationality of cryonics and focuses on the ways in which conceptions of the body, life and death and their relationship are being reconfigured. In the final hours of Ross and four other individuals, who also chose to enter 'the portal'¹ prematurely, the guide addressed them (DeLillo 2016):

Your situation, those few of you on the verge of the journey toward rebirth. You are completely outside the narrative of what we refer to as history. There are no horizons here. We are pledged to an inwardness, a deep probing focus on who and where we are. (p. 237)

This novel exhibits a keen awareness of the central themes governing the debate surrounding posthumanism as summarised by Thomsen (2013:171): how to cope with mortality, the attraction of immortality, the ongoing evolution of humanity, the idea of genetic engineering, the ability to upload minds to free them from flesh and the possibility of mutations. In a word, the novel can be considered an exploration of the experience of different thresholds, and the collapsing of boundaries that begs the questions: what is it that makes us human? What is the (imagined) relationship between the self and body? Together, these questions reveal the very human desire to tether ourselves to forms that will outlast our own bodies – the desire to cope with human mortality.

'When does the person become the body?' (p. 139): The concept of the posthuman and the role of posthuman bodies in *Zero K*

Ferrando (2020) stated that the current era can be defined as posthuman and explains: '[b]ecause the traditional notion of the human has been radically challenged not only by emerging bio-technologies, but also by our new understanding of the significance, and impact, of our species on planet Earth'. In Ferrando's (2013) view, the *posthuman* has become an umbrella term to refer to a variety of different movements and schools of thought. She argued:

In contemporary academic debate, 'posthuman' has become a key term to cope with an urgency for the integral redefinition of the notion of the human, following the onto-epistemological as well as scientific and bio-technological developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. (p. 26)

In this regard, Fishel (2017), too, makes the valid statement that the posthuman is defined by its conceptual complexity. McDonald and Mitchell (2017:1) also emphasise the diversity of (and the resulting productive tension between) interpretations. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive exposition of the similarities and differences between the notions of the posthuman – only a few aspects relevant to *Zero K* are briefly highlighted.

1. The guide explained: 'You are to be postmarked *Zero K*. You are the heralds, choosing to enter the portal prematurely. The portal. Not a grand entranceway or flimsy website but a complex of ideas and aspirations and hard-earned realities'.

What is, however, quite clear is that as the time passed, the stress has fallen on different questions with regard to the concept 'human' – approaches which support one another, yet which are also occasionally contradictory. Ferrando (2014a) wrote:

[T]hat posthumanism is a theoretical frame as well as an empirical one which can apply to any field of enquiry, starting from our location as a species, to the individual gaze. Posthumanism addresses the existential question 'who am I' in conjunction with other related questions, such as 'what am I' and 'where and when are we?' (p. 168)

These problematic existential notions are formulated explicitly in *Zero K* (DeLillo 2016):

'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 not knowing'. (p. 131)

Hayles (1999:3) pointed out that the posthuman is doing away with the 'natural' self and that 'the posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction'. Although the different movements and schools of thought address the 'human' in different ways, they have the same starting point in common: 'all of them see the human not as static notion, but as a dynamic one' (Ferrando 2020). In sum, Hayles (1999) made the following statement (with particular relevance to *Zero K*):

But the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals the end of a *certain conception of the human*, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings *exercising their will* through individual agency and choice. (p. 186, [author's own emphasis])

At the end of DeLillo's (2016) *Zero K*, a character observed:

We are born without choosing to be. Should we have to die in the same manner? [...] Isn't it a human glory to refuse to accept a certain fate? What is it that we want here? Only life. (p. 252)

These words encapsulate the core of the issues explored in this novel: Firstly, death as a discourse, specifically the Western perception of death, and the notion of death as an absolute end; secondly, a passion or desire for life, and the possibility of attaining immortality by human intervention; and thirdly, (re)considering what it means to be human – therefore, questions that consider what exactly constitutes *humanity*. Thomsen (2013:194) made the following statement about DeLillo's (2016) writings, which can also be applied to *Zero K*:

While DeLillo is obviously fascinated with the idea of a transformation into a new way of being that could be furthered by technology, he is equally critical of what that world might be like.

Within the context of the novel, the question ultimately posed is '... what happens to a single human body when the forces of death and life join?' At the same time, the paradigm shift in the ontological and epistemological perception of the human body can be related to the challenges of

the posthuman condition, and consequently, following Ferrando (2014b:213, 219), leads to following questions (from a futuristic perspective): '[w]ill posthumans need embodiment at all?' (Ferrando 2014b:213). And '[w]ill the posthuman body still be shaped in terms of gender, race, age, class, (dis)ability and sexuality, among others?' (Ferrando 2014b:119).

In life, the human body is one of the richest texts with imagery, where in this case a text is a set of signs that need to be interpreted. Both empirically and philosophically our bodies are the essential *premises* of our being in the world. However, human embodiment and subjectivity are currently undergoing a profound mutation – the implication is *how* to think about the body and embodiment. To begin with as mentioned by Wolfe (2010:xxii), 'it means that we can no longer talk of *the* body or even for that matter of *a* body in the traditional sense'. He also explained:

Rather, 'the body' is now seen as a kind of *virtuality*, but one that is, precisely for that reason, all the *more* real. [...] then the environment, and with it 'the body', becomes unavoidably a virtual, multidimensional space produced and stabilized by the recursive enactions and structural couplings of autopoietic beings who share [...] consensual domain. (p. xxii)

Zero K explores the possibility of a move from a natural world to one where humans instigate the transition to immortality through cryonic freezing of the body. This novel focuses on vulnerability, finitude and embodiment as crucial dimensions of ethical thought. It redraws the boundaries between life and death – the apparent contradiction between death as a final closure and a new unfolding, and consequently, it is concerned not only with the government of the living but also with control over life and death and the practices of dying. The narrator, Jeffrey Lockhart, is summoned by his father, Ross, to the 'Convergence', a mysterious compound in the desert near the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Ross's much younger wife, Artis Martineau, is in the final stages of multiple sclerosis. The Convergence is a project as well as a scientific and spiritual movement, the mission of which is 'to stretch the boundaries of what it means to be human – stretch and then surpass' (p. 71). It promotes dreams of immortality and control over life and death with technological interaction. Ross explains, '[t]hey're making the future. A new idea of the future. Different from the others' (p. 30). The aim is to preserve life through cryonic freezing until a future time when biomedical advances and new technologies can return humans to a life of transcendent promise. Bodies are stored in capsules, sometimes with the brains removed for future thawing and reassembly. On the eve of Artis's scheduled encapsulation, Ross announces that he will be 'going with her' (p. 110). He explains, 'I'm ending one version of my life to enter another and far more permanent version' (p. 111). Because Ross is in good health, far from a natural death, he must use a special unit, Zero K²: '[i]t's predicated on the subject's willingness to make a certain kind of transmission to the next level' (p. 112). This eponymous unit serves to

2.The title of the novel refers to this unit and already puts the novel within the framework of the posthuman.

emphasise ethical and moral issues: '[i]s it outright murder? Is it a form of assisted suicide that's horribly premature? Or is it a metaphysical crime that needs to be analysed by philosophers?', Jeffrey asks (p. 114). Initially, Jeffrey convinces Ross to abandon this idea; however, 2 years later Ross fulfils his decision, as he was no longer able to live without Artis.

As characters, Ross and Jeffrey are, according to Tulathimutte (2016), 'foils: they represent two competing visions of a human being', and therefore, of life and death and the question of how people relate to death as well as life. For Tulathimutte, it is clear that Jeffrey is 'the Enlightenment humanist', whose obsession with words, with language, with names and with definitions is repeatedly emphasised. Jeffrey believes that identity (a person with a name, and history and memory) and finally death, are essential to being human and that 'the human essence is monistic – one body, one soul, under God, indivisible' (Tulathimutte 2016) – he rejected the mind-body duality. He avowed:

I never felt more human than I did when my mother lay in bed, dying. [...] This was a wave of sadness and loss that made me understand that I was a Man expanded by grief. [...] There were images, visions, voices and how a woman's last breath gives expression to her son's constrained humanity. (p. 248)

The mother's death brings the man face to face with his own mortality, which is often more unbearable than her death itself. It is also clear that Jeffrey believes that the self is perceived as a synthesis of mind, and body and that we as humans are constituted as subjects by embodiment and a linguistic order.

By contrast (and ironically),³ Jeffrey's father is the visionary posthumanist who, as Tulathimutte points out, 'sees death a logistical problem' and the human as a separable biological entity, essentially reducible to soma or body and brain. As Badmington (2003:16) put it, '[t]he truth of the human, of what it means to be human, lies, that is to say, in the rational mind, or soul, which is entirely distinct from the body'. According to Wamberg and Thomsen (2016), when we consider whether increased longevity might turn into actual immortality, we truly enter the field of speculative posthumanism. Like Roden (2015), Wamberg and Thomsen (2016) claimed that speculative posthumanism:

[I]s attentive to our limited abilities to predict what lies beyond our present all-too-human condition and that therefore stresses the complete openness – from technology, to ethics, to aesthetics – of what the posthuman being might actually be about, except transgressing human experience in the widest sense. (p. 95)

Within the framework of the speculative posthumanist paradigm, Ross and the disciples of the Convergence understand the body as an object for control and mastery rather than as an intrinsic part of the self. They reveal our very human desire to tether ourselves to forms that will

3.Thomsen (2013:194) made the point that in all DeLillo's novels, the generation gap makes more than a slight difference, but illustrates a radically different approach to the world that cannot be comprehended from the perspective of the older generation of main characters.

outlast our own bodies. Ross is also a powerful billionaire businessman, a self-made man shaped by money – a man who indeed has the wealth, power and leisure to conceptualise himself and his wife as autonomous beings *exercising their will* through individual agency and choice. As a young man, Ross had already consciously reinvented his identity. Ross Lockhart is an assumed name; he was born Nicholas Satterswaite. For Ross, this decision was an aspiration to *self-realisation* through words or language, and '[i]n time he would become the man he'd only glimpsed when *Ross Lockhart* was a series of alphabetic strokes on a sheet of paper' (p. 81).

'Am I just the words' (p. 158): The relationship between the self, the body and language

Although Ross or Artis and Jeffrey represent opposing views with regard to human existence and life and death, language is problematised by both views, and both parties agree that as humans, our experiential world is filtered by language and reason. Jeffrey believes that humans are constituted as subjects by a linguistic order and states: '[t]his is what I do to defend myself against some spectacle of nature. Think of a word' (p. 130). He admits: 'I liked reading books that nearly killed me, books that helped tell me who I was, the son who spites his father by reading such books' (p. 26). Because death is an absolute Other to Jeffrey, it belongs (if at all) to the farthest borders of language and, as such (like the subconscious), it can never be completely captured in words. In *Aporias*, Derrida (1993) also refers to this problem: '[i]t is well known that if there is one word that remains absolutely unassignable or unassigning with respect to its concept and to its thingness, it is the word "death"'.⁴

It is notable that Ross explicitly explains the important role of language for the Convergence (DeLillo 2016):

There are philologists designing an advanced language unique to the Convergence. Word roots, inflections, even gestures. People will learn it and speak it. A language that will enable us to express things we can't express now, see things we can't see now, see ourselves and others in ways that unite us, broaden every possibility. (p. 33)

Towards the end of the novel, when Ross has already undergone the process of cryonic suspension, an anonymous (but clearly central) character within the framework of the Convergence explains the logic of Ross's decision (DeLillo 2016):

We have language to guide us out of dire times. We are able to think and speak about what can conceivably happen in time to come. Why not follow our words bodily into the future tense? (p. 253)

Humans are embodied, and so are human thoughts, human language and human phenomenological reception. Sobchack

⁴In conjunction with Derrida's argument, one could also refer to the British artist, Damien Hirst. Hirst won fame with his animals in vitrines, like the huge shark in the artwork with the telling title *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991).

(2004:4), guided by existential phenomenology, described embodiment as a 'radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble*'. In sum, as Sobchack (2004) writes, the lived body is:

[A]t once, both an objective *subject* and a subjective *object*: a sentient, sensual, and sensible ensemble of materialised capacities and agency that literally and figurally makes sense of, and to, both ourselves and others. (p. 2)

Halfway through the novel, a brief shift of perspective occurs. For six pages (pp. 157–162), the reader is shown the inner monologue that alternates between the first and third person: the repetitive, fragmented and koan-like thoughts of Artis, the woman encapsulated in cryonic suspension, who is at the existential heart of the narrative. The problem of absence as a lasting presence and death as a living reality, silence *and* discourse are foregrounded in this section (DeLillo 2016):

'But am I who I was'. (p. 157)

'Am I just the words'. (p. 158)

'I am made of words'. (p. 158)

'I try to know who I am'. (p. 161)

'She knows these words. She is all words but she doesn't know how to get out of words into being someone, being the person who knows the words'. (p. 157)

'Where is my body. Do I know what this is. I only know the word and I know it out of nowhere'. (p. 159)

'Can't I stop being who I am and become no one'. (p. 160)

'What does it mean to be who I am'.. (p. 162)

This inner monologue relates to the issues and intricacies foregrounded by posthuman thought. Fishel (2017:52) emphasised that the figure of the posthuman will disperse into becoming, not being; process, not product; desire, not completion. It is a plea to a future to hear to witness that we crave to become *transformed*. Post-humanising is thus a performance of our desire to change ourselves. It manifests in the novel on a formal linguistic level and is articulated in the repetitive question-cum-statement: '[b]ut am I who I was'. In the process of becoming in this chapter, Artis formulates and reiterates existential questions *without question marks*. This section, therefore, also contains traces of an endless suggestion and meaning in waiting, as well as a latent possibility to make sense of events and of the human condition.

The shift in the social and individual perception of the human constitutes one of the most important challenges we currently face as a species, as individuals, and as moral and social beings. In a poetic fashion, this short chapter demonstrates that death is not necessarily an absolute end. It also demonstrates Braidotti's (2013) notion of posthuman death theory as a vital continuum. In this gap between the absence and presence, Artis is in bardo, an intermediate or a transitional or liminal state between death and rebirth. The suggestion here is that Artis, 'the one whose mind and failing body would soon begin to drift, on schedule, into the void'

(Braidotti 2013:3) tries in the critical phase of becoming to constitute life by means of words that function as an antipode for the approaching 'Great Absence' or 'Great Silence' in the encapsulation. Also foregrounded is the relationship between body, language and life and death, and the fact that words constitute our understanding of things and of ourselves.

Death and the challenges of posthumanism

In *Zero K*, both death and life are foregrounded as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – a combination of awestruck fear and enthralling fascination. This novel considers the fear of death, but ultimately (as Gerace states), it is about the fear of life (Gerace 2016). In her writing on ways of dying in the posthuman context, Braidotti (2013:130) refers to 'internally produced and self-run ways of dying: suicide, burn-out, depression and other psychosomatic pathologies'. To this, another way of dying can be added, namely, the conscious decision to transition to the next level of existence, as the novel suggests. Braidotti's posthuman death theory argues a similar case: because humans are mortal, death or the transience of life is written in our core: it is the event that structures our timelines and frames our time zones, 'not as a limit, but as a porous threshold' (Braidotti 2013:131).

DeLillo, here, engage the Western notion of the finality of death. Death is the lens through which everything is seen. It is also possible to read this concern with death from the perspective of Existentialism, the central premise of which is that existence can be defined by the irrefutable law of the inevitability of death. Existentialism is concerned not only with the existential terror of death but also with the existential terror of life. As an antithesis to the inescapability of death, the novel enters the field of speculative posthumanism. Braidotti directly confronts the question of a posthuman theory of death. As she pointed out, '[o]ne's view of death depends on one's assumptions about life' (Braidotti 2013:131). She considered posthuman death theory as a 'vital continuum' – this refers to her matter-realist view of life as a generic force of 'cosmic energy'. The death of the individual, then, cannot be seen as the teleological end of life because life is not an inherent property of the individual, but rather the opposite: the temporality of the mortal individual inherently means that death has *always already* occurred. That is to say, because the individual is tethered to her mortality, death is not a limit that she approaches, but rather a threshold that she transgresses. For this reason, 'death as a constitutive event is behind us; it has already taken place as a virtual potential that constructs everything we are' (Braidotti 2013:132). It is because of its inescapability that death is understood by consciousness as a precursor for existence. The actual event of death is just an iteration of the potential that has always already existed. Death is not an indifferent and inanimate state of matter, but rather a position on the spectrum of vitality.

In her discussion of life, death and cryonic suspension, Von Verschuer (2020:156) argued that life and death are one entangled process in constant motion. Therefore, she suggests

dropping the static terms life and death and replacing them with the processual terms *living* and *dying*; to be more precise and to convey their entanglement, conflating the two terms into one: *living-dying*. She further argues, '[w]hile living-dying is a process always in motion, the aim of technologically induced cryonic stasis is to interrupt this process'.

Zero K forces the reader and the main characters to confront the spectre of our own mortality. In this regard, also compare Freud's famous pronouncement '[t]he aim of all life is death'. The novel enters into conversation with the prospect of dying and the finality of death. It explores the awareness of death, and the anticipation of (and concern with) an absolute cessation. This awareness (according to some critics) is a typically male concern. For example, Smith (2007:10) maintained that the implicit assumption underlying the thanatological tradition is that the figure of the author or artist is inevitably male, whilst the dying figure is always female. Women are at the mercy of the central myths, or narrative structures, of Western culture. In these narratives, she is either ostracised or destroyed, and it is impossible for her to attain the status of an active subject (compare the Orpheus myth, amongst others). Smith's argument ostensibly holds true for *Zero K*, with an active male subject and dying female figures. Jeffrey lost his mother, Madeline (Ross's first wife), and Artis, Ross's current wife, is the dying subject in the final stages of multiple sclerosis. However, with his writing, DeLillo challenges the central myths of narrative structures of Western culture in which the woman is written away into silence or destroyed, and in which it is impossible for her to attain the status of active subject. Artis, whilst dying, is simultaneously an active subject, as she takes the decision to challenge death and to accept the 'treatment' in order to possibly attain immortality. And, in the process of cryonic freezing she is not written away into silence.

In contrast, Ross, the typical extension of the patriarch, also occupies the position of the active subject. He makes the conscious decision to follow his wife into the next plane of existence. His decision (like the conscious reinvention of his identity), however, should be read in conjunction with his narcissism and his desire to have control over all things, even over death itself.

'[B]ut I kept on looking' (p. 257): The relationship between ways of seeing, art and death in the context of posthumanism

Ways of seeing manifest on various levels throughout the novel. In *Zero K*, the visual aspects of the novel as a central theme are presented in tandem with the problem of life and death – the ethics of looking and being looked at are foregrounded. What is depicted in the course of events, and the ways of looking, could be described as a real, an imagined or heavily mediated situation. The problematisation of ways of seeing and of perception are articulated by Artis early on in the novel (DeLillo 2016):

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. I don't know the details or the terminology but I do know that the optic nerve is not telling the full truth. We're seeing only imitations. The rest is our invention, our way of reconstructing what is, if there is any such thing, philosophically, that we can call actual. (p. 45)

Artis also claimed to: '... have every belief that [...] will reawaken to a new perception of the world [...] and] will be reborn into a deeper and truer reality' (p. 47). These pronouncements express the crux of the visual paradigm present in the novel. It indeed 'signals the end of a certain conception of the human' (within the framework of posthumanism) as Hayles (1999:186) explains.

Jeffrey is, with the exception of the few pages (pp. 157–162) that express Artis's internal monologue, the first-person narrator of the novel. Jeffrey, as the subject of focalisation, is the internal focaliser, the point from which the elements of the fabula are viewed. Halfway through the novel, he makes the axiomatic statement: '[t]his was my role here, to watch whatever they put in front of me' (p. 139). Yet Jeffrey eventually becomes more than mere focaliser; he also becomes a forced witness and/or voyeur. 'I opened my eyes and looked a while longer, the son, the stepson, the *privileged witness*' (p. 258 [*author's own emphasis*]). Through this process, he also makes the reader an accomplice.

In addition to the striking role that visual elements play in the novel, different forms of art are referred to and ways of looking are also raised. These aspects can also be investigated from within the context of posthumanism. Kordic, Godward and Martinique (2016) claimed that posthumanism as theory influences art, 'as art has always been there to "imitate life" as well as witness and mirror our own getting used to new ideas and how they relate to us'. According to Kordic et al. (2016), posthuman art is often more a way of *looking at art* than creating art, more what is expected of the viewer than what the artist offers up for view. It is a challenge and a dialogue. As narrator and focaliser, Jeffrey emphasises the act of looking throughout the novel: 'I looked left and right and left again, testing one wall against the other. The paintings that have a kind of spiderwork finesse, a delicacy that intensified the ruin' (p. 257). Despite Ross and Jeffrey's opposing views regarding the definition of being human, their views with regard to art show a sense of congruence, as explicitly expressed by Jeffrey: '[w]e discussed the paintings. He had learned the language, I had not, but our *way of seeing* was not so different, it turned out' (p. 258 [*author's own emphasis*]). Jeffrey's comment relates to the possibility to:

[D]efine posthumanism as a position that wants to explore how other entities encounter the world rather than privileging our own world view, then it is not about the rejection or eradication of human perspective on the world, but the *pluralization of perspective*. (Kordic et al. 2016:n.p.)

In accordance with the emphasis on ways of looking at art, *Zero K* brings to the fore the questions of what art is, what it

means and what the function of art is today, specifically within the context of posthumanism. However, it is problematic to give a simple definition of art or of an artwork and to simply continue to define the function or value of art, because the concepts and boundaries of what art is are constantly being challenged and redrawn. Goldie and Schellekens (2010:132, 134) emphasised that art helps us to appreciate our own humanity and the sense of our shared humanity in a special way by relating what is presented to our ethical lives, in the broadest sense of the word 'ethical'. Bert Olivier also addresses this issue in his article 'Art and the ethical today' (2007). Olivier (2007:66) and Freeland (2001:18) discussed Lucy Lippard's defence of the controversial art work by Serrano entitled *Piss Christ*.⁵ Lippard uses a three-pronged analysis: (1) the work's *formal* and *material* attributes, (2) its *content* (the thought or conceptual *meaning* it expresses) and (3) its *context* (social, cultural and historical contexts) or place in the Western art tradition. These aspects are also relevant to *Zero K*.

The Convergence is first and foremost a location for a scientific and spiritual project and movement, and it is also a conceptual art project, 'a model of shape and form, a wilderness vision, all lines and angles and juted wings, set securely nowhere' (p. 16). This refers to the work's 'formal and material attributes'. It not only offers the promise of biological immortality but also offers a kind of artistic immortality. Ross explains:

Artis says we ought to regard it as a work-in-progress, an earthwork, a form of earth art, land art. Build up out of the land and sunk down into it as well. (DeLillo 2016:10)

Earthwork as art refers to the fact that some artists have used the earth's surface itself as their medium, rather than sculpting materials taken from the earth (Zelanski & Fisher 1993:322). Posthuman tendencies (the content) are reflected by and in art in the Convergence as Jeffrey realises he (DeLillo 2016):

I thought of the movie screens that appeared and vanished, the silent films, the mannequin with no face. [...] And the dead, or maybe dead, or whatever they were, the cryogenic dead, upright in their capsules. This was art in itself, nowhere else but here. (p. 74)

In the Convergence, there are explicit references to false, painted doors in the hallways, as well as 'murals of ravaged landscapes, on and on' (p. 257). In the halls, Jeffrey is randomly, yet repeatedly, confronted with oversized screens that descend from the ceiling, showing harrowing scenes of violent death, mass destruction and environmental catastrophes, repulsive yet compulsive viewing: villages swallowed by water and mudslides, self-immolating monks, chemical clouds hanging over treetops, tsunamis and the ravages of bloody wars. Essentially, Jeffrey (and the reader) is confronted with the pessimistic narrative of the Anthropocene: an involuntary entropic apocalypse. The relationship between art, death and catastrophe is foregrounded.

⁵*Immersion (Piss Christ)* is a 1987 photograph by the American artist and photographer Andres Serrano. It depicts a small plastic crucifix submerged in a small glass tank of the artist's urine. This photograph was highly offensive to many people (Freeland 2001).

In *Art and Death*, Townsend (2008) looked closely at the way contemporary Western artists negotiate death, both as personal experience and in the wider community. Townsend considers art's use of death, rather, a living in, and through death. Braidotti (2013) stresses the relationship between art and death within a posthuman context:

Art is also, moreover, cosmic in its resonance and hence posthuman by structure, as it carries us to the limits of what our embodied selves can do or endure. In so far as art stretches the boundaries of representation to the utmost, it reaches the limits of life itself, and thus confronts the horizon of death. To this effect, art is linked to death as the experience of limits. (p. 107)

Early in the narrative, an anonymous character makes the salient statement: '[c]atastrophe is our bedtime story' (p. 66). An important concept around which many of the key issues in posthumanism have crystallised is the notion of the Anthropocene.⁶ An underlying theme of the novel is the so-called 'Anthropocene epoch' – a epoch defined by the human impact on ecological and even geological processes, and the idea that, through the self-destructive tendencies of cultures, the world as we know it – including humanity – is ending (Wamberg & Thomsen 2016). For Wamberg and Thomsen, the merging of the posthuman with the pessimist narrative of the Anthropocene stresses that the:

Two labels are two aspects of basically the same phenomenon: an exponentially accelerating technological culture absorbing both the environment (Anthropocene) and the human body (posthumanism), blending entropic/ordered and negentropic tendencies.

Braidotti (2013) also made the convincing argument that posthuman theory is a:

[G]enerative tool to help us rethink the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age known as *Anthropocene*, the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet. (p. 5)

Nimmo (2019) noted that the concept of the Anthropocene implies a paradoxical posthumanism, inviting critical reflection upon our existential status as animal species amongst others inhabiting a finite planet, whilst potentially reiterating the techno-humanist promise that we are the all-defining agent at the centre of the world and capable of being the absolute masters of our fate. In the novel, the same speaker who refers to catastrophe as our bedtime story makes a (seemingly) paradoxical pronouncement in the next paragraph: '[a]t some point in the future, death will become unacceptable, even as the life of the planet becomes more fragile' (p. 66).

The visual screens are indeed 'itemizing the different socially distributed and organized ways of dying: violence, diseases, poverty, accidents, wars and environmental catastrophes' (Braidotti 2013:130). It shows the destabilisation of the autonomy of the human subject and thereby enters the posthuman field. The footage of the cataclysmic disasters is repeatedly articulated in the novel (DeLillo 2016), for example:

⁶The term *Anthropocene* was coined by Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen. It was officially adopted by the International Geological Congress in South Africa in August 2016.

He said, 'How fragile we are. Isn't it true? Everyone everywhere on this earth.'

I listened to him speak about the hundreds of millions of people into the future billions who are struggling to find something to eat not once or twice a day but all day every day. He spoke in detail about food systems, weather systems, the loss of forests, the spread of drought, the massive die-offs of birds and ocean life, the levels of carbon dioxide, the lack of drinking water, the waves of virus that envelop broad geographies'. (p. 126)

The content of the videos on screens in the hallways shows first an acknowledgement of complicity and the dramatic effects of human activity on the planet. According to Nimmo (2019), such an acknowledgement is at the heart of the Anthropocene and underpins its invitation to critical self-reflection. However, in stressing that humanity is a force of nature and emphasising that no other species has ever had such an impact on the Earth, the Anthropocene simultaneously invites the very emphasis upon the ostensibly exceptional nature of human beings that characterise humanist thinking. Secondly, the videos on the oversized screens can be considered video art, showing, like a fractured mirror, the beauty *and* horror in art and the disorder that we all know to be the fact of our *Zeitgeist* (the artworks' context). These images are also contextually linked to a real visual intertext that demands our attention, namely, Thomas Hirschhorn's video *Touching Reality* (2012). As part of the ethical drive underlying the exhibition at The Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane in 2013, Hirschhorn explained his work in the exhibition text, *Why Is It Important – Today – To Show and Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies?* Hirschhorn refers to the fact that the images are made by non-photographers, most of them witnesses. These images do not have any photographic quality, and there is no aesthetic approach. For Hirschhorn (2013), this irrelevance of quality is what makes it important to look as such images:

Looking at images of mutilated human bodies is important because it can contribute to an understanding that the incommensurable act is not the looking; what is incommensurable is that destruction has happened in the first place – that a human, a human body, has been destroyed, indeed, that an incommensurable amount of human beings have been destroyed. It is important – more than anything else – to understand this. (n.p.)

In *Ways of looking. How to experience contemporary art* (2014), Ward distinguishes various techniques that are consciously employed to make art resonate in a particular way in the human psyche: art as entertainment, as confrontation, as event, as message, as a joke, as spectacle and as mediation. Ward (2014:47–48) identified Hirschhorn's video art as 'confrontation' as can indeed be said of the video images in the novel. Confrontation art is a genre specialising in shocking, distasteful, offensive and sometimes badly made objects. Ward describes the apocalyptic images in *Touching Reality* as 'sickening raw photographic images', 'hideous images to zoom in on some fresh horror' and 'terrifying scenes'. She then realises what the effect of art as confrontation is on her psyche: '[u]pon reflection, all I can see is a mirror of my own guilt – that's the real gut-wrenching moment and

the true horror I'm faced with' (p. 50). Death and the human body in relation to art remain integral to *Zero K* and the events of the novel. DeLillo shows us, to borrow a passage from Townsend (2008:20), that 'Art's use of death is, rather, a living in, and through, death'. The novel refers to 'a new generation of earth art, with human bodies in states of suspended animation' (p. 16). (Again, the artworks' formal and material attributes.) Regarding the representation of death, it is concerned precisely with a striking absence, and in this way, the representation itself is a movement away from that which is being depicted. In this novel, however, the irony is that death does not result in a loss of image, but that it paradoxically foregrounds the visually recognisable object of the human body. In the *Convergence*, Jeffrey has multiple encounters with bodies as art: macabre, naked and motionless figures. Some of them are *mannequins*, and some appear to be a 'freeze frame of naked humans in pods' (p. 146). The formal and material attributes are foregrounded, as Ross explains: '[t]his is not a silicone-and-fiberglass replica. Real flesh, human tissue, human being. Body preserved for limited time by cryoprotectants applied to the skin' (p. 231). This symbiotic relationship between human body and technology, the human and the posthuman (the works' content) presents a new step in evolutionary terms, and a new energy within the framework of posthumanism.

During his second visit to the *Convergence*, Jeffrey also encounters Artis's (*Art is*) frozen, naked body in a pod, and he responds with awe (DeLillo 2016):

Her body seemed lit from within. She stood erect, on her toes, shaved head tilted upward, eyes closed, breasts firm. It was an idealized human, encased, but it was also Artis. Her arms were at her sides, fingers cupped at thighs, legs parted slightly.

It was a beautiful sight. It was the human body as a model of creation. I believed this. It was a body in this instance that would not age. (p. 258)

For Jeffrey, this is a mystical experience and even a momentary glimpse of the unseeable. An important aspect emphasised by Jeffrey's reaction is the interface between the human and posthuman through the lens of art. Contextually, the reference to the body 'as a model of creation' can be related to the classical representations of the human form as an ideal of beauty in art, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (1487), Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498–1499) and *David* (1501–1504), and Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1498–1499). This demonstrates that 'the roots of posthumanism, in art and in general, can be found in its predecessor and antithesis – humanism' (Kordic et al. 2016).

Staring at hundreds of naked human bodies in gleaming pods displayed in an enormous room, Jeffrey reaches the overwhelming conclusion (DeLillo 2016):

Here, there were no lives to think about or imagine. This was pure spectacle, a single entity, the bodies regal in their cryonic bearing. It was a form of visionary art; it was body art with broad implications. (p. 256)

Jeffrey's reaction raises the question: What *are* the 'broad implications?' Is this visionary art that aestheticizes death? Is death a metaphor for art, or is art a metaphor for death? Is art in fact a metaphor for life? The last possibility becomes especially pertinent when the following notion of Deleuze is considered: 'art [*is*] an intensive practice that aims at creating new ways of thinking, perceiving and sensing Life's infinite possibilities' (Braidotti 2013:107). Taken as a whole, these human bodies as art 'reveal the very human desire to tether ourselves to forms that will outlast our own bodies – a drive that pervades art-making itself' (Cohen 2020).

In contrast with the ideal beauty of the human figure, Jeffrey also becomes acquainted with destructive art and the extreme disfigurement of the body – art as confrontation and as spectacle and as alternative means of experience (DeLillo 2016):

Here were figures submerged in a pit, mannequins in convoluted mass, naked, arms jutting, heads horribly twisted, bare skulls, an entanglement of tumbled forms with jointed limbs and bodies, neutered humans, men and women stripped of identity, faces blank except for one unpigmented figure, albino, staring at me, pink eyes flashing. (p. 134)

With regard to the disfigurement of the body in the work of art, one could also refer to Hirschhorn's images of destroyed human bodies as well as the shocking, and at times severely transgressive and provocative, art of Jake and Dinos Chapman. Amongst the best-known work are their haunting mutilated child mannequins in *Zygotic acceleration, biogenetic, de-sublimated, libidinal model (enlarged x 1000)* (1995). The horrors of hell and grotesque evil are depicted in *The sum of all evil* (2013), which consists of four dioramas displaying every horror imaginable (Skovbjerg Paldam 2018). Rosenthal (2000) described the Chapmans' work as 'collaborating with catastrophe', whilst O'Reilly (2009:151) was of the view that the Chapman brothers' confrontational version of the grotesque is based on disfigurement and categorical chaos. For her, violation of the human form (in other words the conceptual meaning it expresses) reminds us of our evolutionary origins and how, with a little interference, human development could take one of many courses.

In a room in the *Convergence*, there is even 'an oversized human skull mounted on a pedestal jutting from the wall' (p. 63), the eyeholes rimmed with jewels and the jagged teeth painted silver. This reminds us of Damien Hirst's controversial diamond studded skull, *For the Love of God* (2007), that conceptionally shows that it is perfectly possible to ironically commoditise death to a level that leaves even the super-rich a little breathless as Townsend (2008) points out. Ward (2014) categorised this work as *art as a joke*. The implication is that it is 'funny' but subversive. Ward argues that this extremely expensive object of desire suggests that we are obsessed with collecting expensive things that will outlast us, things that cannot come with us when we die.

This novel takes stock of two aspects, and finally, presents them explicitly: vision and the role of language – ways of

looking and the impact of words. At the end of the novel, Jeffrey finds himself amongst a few people, including a woman and boy, in the middle of a crosstown bus, west to east. The emphasis is placed on the heightened visual observation of the framed reality that is the day's dying light through the western bus window – the phenomenon *Manhattanhenge* (DeLillo 2016):

It was a striking thing to see, in our urban huddle, the power of it, the great round ruddy mass, and I knew that there was a natural phenomenon, here in Manhattan, once or twice a year, in which the sun's rays align with the local street grid. (p. 273)

The child's reaction is described as follows: '[t]he boy bounced slightly in accord with the cries and they were unceasing and exhilarating, they were prelinguistic grunts. [...] these howls of awe were far more suitable than words' (p. 274). DeLillo novelistically confirms Berger's (1972) point of departure in *Ways of seeing*: '[s]eeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak'. In the final lines of the novel, Jeffrey informs the reader: 'I went back to my seat and faced forward. I didn't need heaven's light. I had the boy's cries of wonder' (p. 274). There is no retrospective view to that which has been left behind, but rather a view to the East, a contemplative glance at the wonder of beauty *and* life, albeit a transient one. The irony, however, is that, finally, the linguistic order *also* does not pass muster. This confirms Badmington's (2011) statement that posthumanism begins with the recognition that humans are not 'constituted as subjects by a linguistic order that pre-exists and transcends them'.

Conclusion

The preceding sections show that the overarching problem foregrounded by *Zero K* is how human mortality should be treated in the face of the inexorability of death, as well as the human desire for immortality. From this investigation of the role that the human body and self and life and death play in *Zero K*, it is evident that there is, in fact, evidence of a posthumanist foundation: from technological practices (the body and cryonic freezing) and ethics (*Zero K* and Ross's decision), to aesthetics (ways of seeing and the role of art). This novel explores 'the vision of undying mind and body' (p. 242), in which the relationship between the self, the body and language, ways of seeing, and art and death plays a significant part. In the end, it is clear that posthumanism in the novel refers to two frames that are foregrounded: an *ontological condition* and a new *conceptualisation* of the human as Nayar (2014) pointed out. *Zero K* engages posthuman ideas but is not a complete rejection of humanism – it is rather a rethinking of its terms and theoretical approaches. The novel, here in its own way as the literature, indeed tries to contemplate (if not to understand fully) the complex notion of the contexts and issues arising from the idea of the posthuman, and/or new human. Finally, posthumanism in the novel can be approached (following Ferrando 2014b:224) as '[m]y future is posthuman, but my posthumanism is rooted in a comprehensive critical account of what it means to be human'.

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