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What Does It Mean To Be Human? Speculative Ekphrasis and Anthropocene Trauma in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*

1 Introduction

The Manhattan art gallery visit has become something of a regularity in Don DeLillo's twenty-first-century fiction. The entirety of the short story "Baader-Meinhof" (2002) takes place at the Gerhard Richter retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in February–May of 2002. In *Falling Man* (2007), a visit to a Giorgio Morandi exhibition in Chelsea provides scenes central to the novel's overall design. And the early pages of *Point Omega* (2010) once again pay a visit to MOMA, where an unnamed character spends a considerable amount of time in the darkness of a room in which Douglas Gordon's "24 Hour Psycho" (1993) is being projected.

In spite of all its encounters with images of different kinds, *Zero K* (2016) marks a break from this tendency to fictionalize events taking place at real-life exhibitions housed by landmark institutions in New York City's art world. The ekphrastic moments of what is the author's most markedly futuristic novel to date all appear at a fictional facility, The Convergence, which specializes in life extension through cryonic freezing. Rather than revolving around existing art works, the scenes are engaged with the visualization of fictitious images that do not belong to what we normally think of as the realm of art. The ekphrasis of *Zero K* can thus be understood as what I in this chapter propose to describe as "speculative ekphrasis": evocations of visual events that resonate with distinct, speculative aesthetic imaginaries. In what follows, I will show how the juxtaposition of this form of speculative ekphrasis with a markedly non-ekphrastic, traumatized language is instrumental to the novel's exploration of what I find to be its chief concerns: the ramifications of the parallel emergence of what is referred to in critical discourse as "the Anthropocene" and "the posthuman subject."

2 DeLillo's speculative ekphrasis

Images play a very important role in DeLillo's oeuvre. In a frequently cited interview, the author shares some reflections on this continuing prevalence, suggesting that "the age of images" has transformed, no less, our modes of self-understanding: "I don't think any attempt to understand the way we live and the way we think and the way we feel about ourselves can proceed without a deep consideration of the power of the image" (Howard 2005: 125). Undoubtedly, such a consideration merits a broadly designed unravelling of our multifarious interactions with visuality that exceed the various genres of art writing. It would have to address the ways in which the image appears in our everyday lives in a global world where the infrastructures of communication and information are increasingly shaped by the digital screen. Furthermore, it would have to engage not merely with the literary description of images, but rather, more comprehensively, with the dramatization in novelistic form of the various influences they exert on individuals and collectives.

Indeed, much of DeLillo's fiction is characterized by an ambition precisely to perform "a deep consideration of the power of the image." In *Underworld* (1997), for instance, the evocation of a fictitious screening of Abraham Zapruder's infamous footage of the Kennedy assassination revolves as much around the impact of the images on a very select audience gathered in a Manhattan loft as around the massively recycled images themselves, which DeLillo probably took for granted would be well-known to his readers; over a few pages, the novel can be said to address and demonstrate the way the film has shaped the cultural and collective memories of the President's brutal death.¹ Similarly, for all their vibrant art description, the ekphrastic moments of "Baader-Meinhof," *Falling Man*, and *Point Omega* are as significant for their elaboration of the human mind in the moment of preoccupation with the image, as with the image itself. Rather than revolving around the verbal description of specific imagery as it appears through a medium-specific semiotic system, DeLillo's ekphrastic object is more aptly described in terms of what we might call the evocation of a distinctly visual event.

Such a re-articulation of the ekphrastic object is not unprecedented in the scholarly literature that has appeared over the last quarter of a century. Indeed, it appeared urgent in several writings that were published during a decade that must be considered seminal for any conception of "ekphrastic studies," namely, the 1990s, which offered explorations of the elasticity of ekphrasis from impor-

1 For more on this passage in *Underworld*, see Vågnes 2011: 74–78.

tant contributors such as James Heffernan, Peter Wagner, Mieke Bal, and W. J. T. Mitchell. Chiefly, these writings spoke for a generalization of ekphrasis as a critical concept, accentuating its potential to address intermediality across the arts.² This movement of ongoing reconceptualization has continued into the digital age, with its many reorientations concerning the relationship between image and word.³ We have witnessed what Keith Moxey describes as a fatigue in the humanities with “regimes of representation that trade in ascriptions of meaning” at the same time as they express a newly intensified interest in *presentation* – in what Moxey refers to as “the presence of the visual object, how it engages with the viewer in ways that stray from the cultural agendas for which it was conceived and which may indeed affect us in a manner that sign systems fail to regulate” (Moxey 2008: 132–133). Arguably, this shift in focus also implies a recognition of the “visual event” as the object of visual culture studies. The question of visibility, Mieke Bal insists, is simple: “What happens when people look, and what emerges from that act? The verb ‘happens’ entails the *visual event* as object, and ‘emerges’ the visual image, but as a fleeting, fugitive, subjective image accrued to the subject” (Bal 2003: 9). In more recent years, ekphrastic theories have been articulated increasingly in response to present media ecology, reflected, for instance, in a thematic issue of *Poetics Today* published in 2018, which aims to revive “rhetorical and performative understandings of ekphrasis that can augment theoretical conceptualizations and bring them into line with the participatory and hybrid practices of ekphrasis today”:

Increasingly, what used to be a central aim of ekphrasis – the description of an artwork – has been replaced by modes of rewriting the artwork and in the process questioning accepted meanings, values, and beliefs, not just relating to the particular artwork in question but

² See, for instance, Peter Wagner’s discussion of this impulse (1996). James Heffernan’s general definition of *ekphrasis* as a “verbal representation of a visual representation” (1991) was further developed by Mitchell in *Picture Theory*, which described ekphrasis as a description of images that “cannot literally come into view” (1994: 158) (see also Mitchell’s comments in Grønstad and Vågnes 2006), and by Mieke Bal, who refers to ekphrasis as an “evocation of absent images” (1999: 118).

³ In the introduction to a 2010 special issue of *French Studies* on a “new ekphrastic poetics,” Susan Harrow observes that the wide approach of “contemporary ekphrastics” reflects a desire to address and critically engage with “reciprocal visual and textual cultures” to study “the modes whereby texts engages with visual culture” (Harrow 2010: 257). On somewhat different but related terms, Cecilia Lindhé distinguishes between “printed ekphrasis” and “rhetorical ekphrasis,” the latter of which “encompasses aspects relevant for our digital age that have not been fully perceived before; digital literature and art align with this concept of ekphrasis, especially in the way that its rhetorical meaning is about effect, immediacy, aurality, and tactility” (Lindhé 2013: 2).

referencing the ways of seeing and the scopic regimes of the culture at large. Since these changes in writing and reading practices tend toward increasing the participation of the reader, a more meta-representational and rhetorical conceptualization of ekphrasis is desirable. (Brosch 2018: 225)

Indeed, the advent of what DeLillo calls “the age of the image” urges such a reconsideration of how ekphrasis might be mobilized as a critical concept in a cultural analysis more aptly directed at contemporary forms. A radical acknowledgment of situatedness allows for a form of image writing that brings spatial, temporal, and affective elements into play in new ways. The conceptualization of what I propose to call “speculative ekphrasis” must be considered as a response to these ongoing considerations in the arts and the humanities.

To an unprecedented degree, *Zero K* sees DeLillo venture into a form of narrative alternatively referred to as “science fiction” or, in this case (and more fittingly), “speculative fiction,” thus introducing new forms of fictional ekphrasis into his writing. It is the writer, editor, and critic Judith Merrill who is credited for first idealizing “speculative fiction” as a way of examining “some postulated approximation of reality by introducing a set of changes, imaginary or inventive,” and in recent years, writers from Margaret Atwood to Charlie Brooker (*Black Mirror*) have returned to that generic description, finding the *sci-fi* moniker an ill-fitting description of their work (Merrill 2017: 27). In a concise yet rich historization of the term, Marek Oziewicz observes how its “semantic register has continued to expand”:

While “speculative fiction” was initially proposed as a name of a subgenre of science fiction, the term has recently been used in reference to a meta-generic fuzzy set supercategory – one defined not by clear boundaries, but by resemblance to prototypical examples – and a field of cultural production. Like other cultural fields, speculative fiction is a domain of activity that exists not merely through texts, but through their production and reception in multiple contexts. (2017)

Such a domain can be productively understood in terms of an “aesthetic imaginary.” The concept of the imaginary, Claus Clüver, Matthijs Engelberts, and Véronique Plesch observe, “has long been an intrinsic part of the ways we understand creative productivity in any medium,” alternatively delineated “as an interface between the subjective position and the world, as a register of thought or as the universe of images and signs, texts and objects of thought,” or “as a way of interpreting the world” (Clüver, Engelberts, and Plesch 2015: 11). As Lene Johannessen observes, aesthetic imaginaries “assume a tenor and function that flow through all the other variants, feeding on and fed by the constituents

that make them up in a temporal and spatial flux, suffusing all that there is in a constant ebb and flow of constitution and rupture” (Johannessen 2019: xi).

As will be evident from my reading of the novel, the ekphrastic moments of *Zero K* mobilize several tropes that we recognize from the aesthetic imaginaries of speculative fiction. They could be considered a variety of what John Hollander in 1988 described as “notional” ekphrases, of imaginary or absent artworks, since they appear at a fictitious underground compound somewhere near Chelyabinsk in Russia, where those wealthy enough to do so have retreated to have their body frozen, anticipating that science will, at some point, be able to bring them back to life (Hollander 1988). All ekphrasis is, in a certain sense, notional, W. J. T. Mitchell argued in *Picture Theory* in response to Hollander’s definition; it must be understood as an attempted creation of “a specific image that is to be found only in the text as its ‘resident alien,’ and is to be found nowhere else” (Mitchell 1994: 157n). Like much of DeLillo’s fiction, the premise of *Zero K* is, in fact, based on existing models, as Eric Cofer points out in a reading of the book: KrioRus, the world’s first actual storage facilities for cryonic treatment, opened in Russia in 2005 (Cofer 2018: 7). As is typical for speculative narratives, the novel provides us with a universe that can be interpreted as both parallel and near-future, but on further inspection, certain aspects of the world it depicts turn out to resemble our historical moment more closely than many readers would like to think. As Dominic Preziosi observes in a review of *Zero K*, the novel stands out in DeLillo’s oeuvre for being “less historical” than his previous work – it is “more futuristic, yet it’s set in a worryingly recognizable present” (Preziosi 2016: 32). Whereas the ekphrastic moments of *Underworld*, “Baader-Meinhof,” *Falling Man*, and *Point Omega* involve a meta-referential play that resonates with their mimetic relationship to existing artworks, similar moments in *Zero K* are non-mimetic in the sense that they engage with distinctly speculative imaginaries. Of particular interest in this context are contrasting imaginaries that are pitted against each other by means of speculative ekphrasis: those of a ravaged, increasingly inhospitable planet, and those of human individuals seeking to transcend this misery, in a form of embodiment yet unknown to us.

3 At the convergence: Aesthetic imaginaries of the Anthropocene

Zero K revolves around protagonist Jeffrey Lockhart’s visits to The Convergence to spend time with his father, Ross, and his seriously ill partner, Artis Martineau,

who, at her deathbed, is about to undergo cryonics. Ross Lockhart, we learn, has made his considerable fortune on “analyzing the profit impact of natural disasters,” and has invested heavily in *The Convergence* (DeLillo 2016: 14). A significant part of the novel has Jeff wandering the corridors of the compound, which are minimalist, nearly empty, and non-distinct, lacking any kind of visual art. There are no windows in the uninviting halls, and all doors are shut, so that both outside and inside worlds have an impenetrable quality. *The Convergence* is the white cube where you go to die, in order to be resurrected, sometime in the future, under unknown circumstances.

Walking around, Jeff repeatedly confronts lowering screens that stretch from wall to wall and reach nearly to the floor, inviting him to watch, describe, and reflect upon what they show him:

There was water racing through woodlands and surging over riverbanks. There were scenes of rain beating on terraced fields, long moments of nothing but rain, then people everywhere running, others helpless in small boats bouncing over rapids. There were temples flooded, homes pitching down hillsides. I watched as water kept rising in city streets, cars and drivers going under. The size of the screen lifted the effect out of the category of TV news. Everything loomed, scenes lasted long past the usual broadcast breath. It was there in front of me, on my level, immediate and real, a woman sitting life-sized on a lopsided chair in a house collapsed in mudslide. A man, a face, underwater, staring out at me. I had to step back but also had to keep looking. It was hard not to look. Finally I glanced back down the hall waiting for someone to appear, another witness, a person who might stand next to me while the images built and clung. There was no audio. (DeLillo 2016: 11)

The footage is silent in terms of its audio but turbulently noisy on a visual level. The lack of any authoritative voiceover to help Jeff contextualize the events that are unfolding in time and place further removes it from the realm of reporting. Indeed, several of the scenes that will appear in collage on the screens at *The Convergence* might have been recorded during natural disasters. Whoever has edited the material has made use of a number of creative strategies in the montage, which eventually comes to include slow motion segments and certain visual motifs that are repeated for effect. Like the setting in which they appear, these video installations are all the author’s invention, vivified in evocative passages that veer between, connect, and interweave descriptive and introspective modes, as the narrator takes the time to dwell on specific images and the impact they have on him, which is both visceral and intellectual.

Among the disturbing segments, one stands out for its depiction of self-inflicted violence. The lowered screen shows three monks seated cross-legged on mats, each holding containers, with candles within reach. They douse themselves with what Jeff realizes is flammable liquid, one of them taking sips

from a bottle. Then the moment pauses distressingly, as one of them struggles with, then finally succeeds in, striking a flame:

I stepped back from the screen. My face was still twisted in response to the third man's reaction when the kerosene passed through his gullet and entered his system. The burning men, mouths open, swayed above me. I stepped farther back. They were formless, soundless, screaming. (DeLillo 2016: 61–62)

The footage will remind some readers of AP photographer Malcolm Browne's award-winning press photograph of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation on June 10, 1963, a protest against South Vietnam president Ngo Dinh Diem's favoritism of Catholics for jobs in higher office in a population overwhelmingly Buddhist. As I have noted before in writing about the picture, research shows that such acts are committed to make claims for a collective cause – they are performative acts staged to appear in a public place, often accompanied by a statement addressed to political figures or to the general public. Their self-destruction is not intended to harm others that happen to be in the vicinity.⁴

The specific background for this particular kind of protest will remain unclear to Jeff as well as to the reader, but self-annihilation through fire comes to serve as a traumatic counter-image to that of self-preservation through ice. The disaster footage as well as the self-immolation video appear to reflect what Susan Sontag, in her 1965 essay “The Imagination of Disaster,” described as science fiction allegories that represent new myths about “the perennial human anxiety about death” (Sontag 1965: 48). Behind science fiction narratives, Sontag wrote, “lurk the deepest anxieties about contemporary existence, about the condition of the individual psyche,” but also “new anxieties about physical disaster, the prospect of universal mutilation and even annihilation” (Sontag 1965: 47). To Sontag, the model scenario of science fiction “involves the discovery of some fundamental alteration in the conditions of existence on our planet” (Sontag 1965: 43). That alteration would, in today's critical language, be described in terms of the “Anthropocene.” Introduced into current critical terminology by chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000, it designates the present era as human-influenced, or anthropogenic, based on global evidence that atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, biospheric, and other earth system processes are now altered by humans (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The Anthropocene is dated very differently by scientists and researchers in an ongoing struggle for the authority of conceptualization and periodization, but, in many accounts, the period starts some 250 years ago with the industrial revolution.

⁴ See Vågnes 2015. For more on self-immolation, see Biggs 2005.

Any fiction of the Anthropocene thus involves an engagement with pasts as well as futures, for as Jennifer Wenzel observes, “prophecy is inseparable from memory, which is another way of saying that memory is always implicitly about futurity.” As Wenzel points out, speculative fiction is “premised on offering ‘memories of the future’, drawing upon the prophetic mode in order to warn us, here and now, of how things will turn out to be, or to have been” (Wenzel 2018: 503).

Jeff Lockhart’s response to his visual encounters in the controlled confinement of *The Convergence* is characterized by its engagement with the aesthetic imaginaries of the Anthropocene. Reverberating with the etymological roots of the word “speculative,” in the Latin *speculatio*, these speculative ekphrases invite the reader to consider the entanglement of Jeff’s observations and contemplations both, as these are shaped by his confrontations with the screens that are lowered in front of him. The protagonist’s acute sense of what Christopher Schaberg describes as “ecological disorientation,” of “confusion concerning one’s place on this planet, however muted, unacknowledged, or pronounced,” shapes his experience of the footage at *The Convergence* (2017: 75). When he arrives there, several flights have already extended the entirety of his stay, but this exhausting trip is the source of something much more profound than the significant jetlag he experiences – in fact, it sets into motion a series of reflections that collectively represent what Schaberg refers to as the “key phenomenological exploration that underpins the novel” (2017: 89). With its location peripheral and remote by any going definition of *central*, and its interiors unable to denote any specific cultural identity rooted in geography, the underground compound seems to leave its visitors in a numbing state of transit, albeit of a more existential kind than that of airline travel. Having been transported across the planet and into the corridors of *The Convergence*, Jeff’s sensitivity to the images is marked by an escalating sense of a double disorientation that is both personal and ecological. Taking a step back, feeling his face twist, Jeff is all at once experiencing, observing, and contemplating the effects of what Richard Crownshaw describes as “Anthropocene trauma,” effective across space and time, in response to “environmental catastrophe generated by global capitalism,” where implicated subjects can be perpetrators (by being, for instance, agents of climate change) but also potential victims (Crownshaw 2016: 247). The traumatic imagery affects what has been called “psychoterratic geographies,” referring to “mental health (psyche) states that are related to place and the condition of the earth (terra),” and, in particular, a sense of “solastalgia,” or “a feeling of desolation and melancholia about the emplaced and lived experience of the chronic deterioration of a loved home environment”:

Open pit coal mining, other forms of mining, urbanization, gentrification, toxic pollution of places and, now, global warming and attendant climate extremes such as drought, have been identified as factors that potentially drive people into solastalgic despair. (McManus, Albrecht, and Graham 2014: 59)

Neither news reportage nor documentary, most of the catastrophic, disturbing visuals appear to be partially staged or manipulated segments intended to instill in the spectator a collectively felt sense of solastalgic despair, on behalf of an increasing percentage of the global population, and thus a desire to leave this troubled world momentarily, only to return with a yet unknown posthuman subjectivity.

Are the images Jeff is confronted with catastrophe art? Does the assembled material represent a form of essayistic or documentary filmmaking? Rather than falling into any of these categories, the films are produced within and for the institutional framework that is *The Convergence*, and the installations are designed by two men who are described as “tall and fair-skinned, twins, in old workpants and matching gray T-shirts” (DeLillo 2016: 68–69). In a presentation resembling a TED talk, the Stenmark brothers – a name Jeff gives them – describe how they intend to “stretch the boundaries of what it means to be human – stretch and then surpass”: “Death is a cultural artifact, not a strict determination of what is humanly inevitable,” they declare (DeLillo 2016: 71). The future is uncertain, but in the face of the Anthropocene trauma of the lowered screen, that uncertainty is a more attractive alternative: “Not so easy to imagine what will be out there, better or worse or so completely altered we will be too astonished to judge” (DeLillo 2016: 75). In *Zero K*, the dystopian aesthetic imaginaries of the Anthropocene are mobilized in order to ignite the utopian aesthetic imaginaries of immortality, manifested in the temptation to cryopreserve the human body and wake up in a moment in time in which what is now our future will have become our past.

4 Artis speaks: Traumatized language and non-ekphrastic style

“They weren’t scientists or social theorists,” Jeff muses about the Stenmark brothers: “What were they? They were adventurers of a kind that I could not quite identify” (DeLillo 2016: 71). Protesting our assumptions about the finitude of human life, the twins instead insist on the capacity of the human race to extend the life span beyond the limitations of our biological bodies. Our sense of self is a product of the neurochemistry of the brain, and if we are able to preserve

this human organ in the temporary slumber of the deep freeze, the lives of our minds can surpass that of our bodies, and our human subjectivity can re-emerge in hitherto unknown forms of embodiment. The brothers are, in part, proponents of what N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* describes as “the posthuman view,” which sees “embodiment in a biological substrate [...] as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life” (Hayles 1999: 2).

Artis Martineau, an archaeologist and a scientist, has in her escalating terminal illness decided to believe in the brothers’ vision of cryonic life extension to which her partner has contributed funding. In spite of her deep knowledge of deep time, she has chosen to come to The Convergence to visit Zero K, a special unit “predicated on the subject’s willingness to make a certain kind of transition to the next level” (DeLillo 2016: 112). The name “Zero K” refers to the conditions necessary to undergo cryonics – absolute zero degrees Kelvin is the temperature at which atoms stop moving. Ross Lockhart, who is in good health, is thinking about joining Artis. Musing on these prospects, Jeff admits to not knowing whether to regard the physical form that the scientists at The Convergence are working on as a “body,” a notion that inevitably raises questions around the very distinction between life and death:

The other thing I didn’t know was what constituted the end. When does the person become the body? The body withdraws from one function and then possibly another, or possibly not – heart, nervous system, brain, different parts of the brain down into the mechanism of individual cells. It occurred to me that there was more than one official definition, none characterized by unanimous assent. They made it up as occasion required. Doctors, lawyers, theologians, philosophers, professors of ethics, judges and juries. (DeLillo 2016: 139–140)

The posthuman view considers “consciousness, regarded as the seat of humanity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon,” writes Hayles, who continues: “extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born” (1999: 3). This aspiration of posthuman philosophy, with genealogies in Cartesian dualism, is manifested in the discursive distinction between “having” and “being” a body: “Identified with the rational mind, the liberal subject possessed a body but was not usually represented as *being* a body,” Hayles writes (1999: 3). As Bernadette Wegenstein observes, human embodiment can be expressed via the phenomenological differentiation between “being a body” and “having a body”:

the former, insofar as it designates the process of living the body, the first-person perspective, coincides with dynamic embodiment; the latter, referencing the body from an external, third-

person perspective, can be aligned with the static body. [...] Contemporary technoscience is in a unique position to exploit this phenomenological convergence of first- and third-person perspectives. (2010: 21)

Indeed, this convergence of perspective is thematized in DeLillo's narrative design in *Zero K* in the characterization of Artis Martineau pre- and post-cryonics. The reader is first introduced to her voice in the dialogue in the first part of the novel, where Jeff, serving as the first-person narrator of the novel, also makes several comments on the way in which she expresses herself, and how she sounds, as she is about to go into treatment. Then, we are led to believe that the voice of a narrative titled "Artis Martineau," placed at the novel's middle, between Jeff's visits to the compound and a closing return to New York City, in fact belongs to Artis, or whatever is left of her, as she wakes up after years in frozen suspension.

The contrast in these two highly different manifestations of how the same individual thinks and articulates herself before and after cryopreservation is striking (and no less so to the reader who decides to delve into the audio book version of *Zero K*, narrated with fine-tuned nuance by actor Thomas Sadoski). When Jeff finds Artis in her suite at The Convergence, he places himself at her side, holds her hand, and talks with her. In a hushed, faltering voice, she describes how she finds herself preoccupied with memories of the smallest bodily sensations of everyday life, seemingly trivial past moments to which she is now highly attentive in an intensified way: "I think about drops of water. How I used to stand in the shower and watch a drop of water edge down the inside of the sheer curtain" (DeLillo 2016: 17). Struggling to articulate how her biography feels shaped by the sense of being a body rather than having a body, her pre-cryonics recollections are both moving and ambiguous and reflect the intensity of the transition that Artis is facing, which, to her, is simultaneously a kind of death and a kind of birth. Indeed, she feels this split at the core of her own speaking voice, in a self-awareness that seems intimately connected with her very sense of language, of the way in which utterance is conditioned by embodiment. "My voice is different," she tells Jeff: "I hear it when I speak in a way that's not natural. It's my voice but it doesn't seem to be coming from me." When Ross protests and suggests that this sensation is a result of her medication, Artis either does not hear or ignores his comments and continues to reflect on the source of the words that are made by her vibrating vocal cords and that pass through her mouth: "It seems to be coming from outside me. Not all the time but sometimes. It's like I'm twins, joined at the hip, and my sister is speaking. But that's not it at all" (DeLillo 2016: 52). For all her frailty and weakness, Artis is intensely present in her conversations with Jeff. She has made her choice

and is determined to follow up on it: “I’m so eager. I can’t tell you. To do this thing. Enter another dimension. And then return. For ever more” (DeLillo 2016: 53).

The sparse dialogue of the fourth and fifth chapters of *Zero K* is enough to give the reader a sense of who Artis is, even if her abilities to express herself are reduced by illness and medication both. Her aesthetic sensibilities shape her very persona, her eye for detail, her touch for tactility. Thus, when she reappears in the six pages that form the chapter “Artis Martineau,” it is hard to recognize her voice, since tone, syntax, and grammar are jumbled: “But am I who I was. I think I am someone. There is someone here and I feel it in me or with me. But where is here and how long am I here and am I only what is here” (DeLillo 2016: 157). An intense feeling of disembodiment and dislocation, expressed by a subject who lacks the human senses, the capacity to smell, taste, and see, characterizes this frightening voice. Artis might be addressing us in the first person, but her perspective is not that of the first person.

Artis’s voice pre-cryonics reflects the fine-tuned machinery that enables human beings to speak, where our brains depend on our sensory organs and on bodily sensations in shaping our sense of self. We are not born with language, we learn to express ourselves through experience, and in “Artis Martineau,” the human voice seems to be cut off from that experience. Artis’s cognitive abilities and her speaking faculties seem to have suffered trauma, and the elegant idiosyncrasies that the reader has come to think of as characteristic of her self-expression have disappeared from her language. Interspersed with her fragmented narrative, such as it is, are sentences articulated by an omniscient narrator in italics: “*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*” (DeLillo 2016: 157). “*She is first person and third person with no way to join them together*” (DeLillo 2016: 160). In a novel dense with visuality and imagery, “Artis Martineau” stands out for its lack of the visual. Whereas several of the scenes that play out at The Convergence are characterized by an intense display of the intricate relationship between the branches of what W. J. T. Mitchell described in 1984 as the “family tree” of images – images that are “graphic (pictures, statues, designs), optical (mirrors, projections), perceptual (sense data, ‘species,’ appearances), mental (dreams, memories, ideas, fantasmata), verbal (metaphors, descriptions, writing)” (Mitchell 1984: 505) – it is as if Artis’s voice is bereft of any relations with the image, including sense data and memories that can assist her in getting in touch with what was herself: “*She is the residue, all that is left of an identity*” (DeLillo 2016: 160). Indeed, the unnerving narrative of her new subjectivity is marked by blindness, by a non-ekphrastic style that seems to speak out of darkness.

5 Iconic speculative ekphrasis: Aesthetic imaginaries of immortality

Gradually, an ekphrastic tension appears to shape Jeff's ruminations about what he is witness to at The Convergence. The traumatic imagery of disaster arrives with regularity and eventually even an air of familiarity – when a screen is lowered in the corridor before him during his second visit, in the seventh chapter of the second part of *Zero K*, he even describes it as a “welcome sight”: “The serial force of images would overwhelm my sense of floating in time. I needed the outside world, whatever the impact” (DeLillo 2016: 235). Pitted against this imagery of natural disaster and violence, however, is the sublime vision of after-life that Jeff is allowed a glimpse of towards the end of his second visit, when he is permitted a brief walk in the cryostorage section into which his father is finally about to enter, two years after Artis was placed there:

There were rows of human bodies in gleaming pods and I had to stop walking to absorb what I was seeing. There were lines, files, long columns of naked men and women in frozen suspension. [...] All pods faced in the same direction, dozens, then hundreds, and our path took us through the middle of these structured ranks. The bodies were arranged across an enormous floor space, people of various skin color, uniformly positioned, eyes closed, arms crossed on chest, legs pressed tight, no sign of excess flesh. [...] 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. (DeLillo 2016: 256)

The image of the body in the pod represents the iconic speculative ekphrasis of *Zero K*, a spectacle of hubris that invites comparison with Frankenstein's monster “reassembled by Science into an automaton of flesh” (Helman 2004: 5). It is emblematic of the aesthetic imaginary of immortality: a figure of Artis's leap of faith and of Ross's refusal to accept the realities of the finitude of human life.

Writing about cryonic suspension in *Impossible Exchange*, Jean Baudrillard suggests that it represents to him the ultimate human fantasy, namely, immortality: “once the human is no longer defined in terms of transcendence or liberty, but in terms of functions of biological equilibrium, the definition of the human itself begins to fade, along with that of humanism” (Baudrillard 2001: 35). “Here was science awash in irrepressible fantasy,” Jeff muses as he is wandering through the storage facilities of The Convergence: “I could not stifle my admiration” (DeLillo 2016: 257). When he finally arrives at the room where Artis has been placed, her body seems “lit from within,” her cryopreserved organism a

symbol of “the human body as a model of creation.” “[S]haved head tilted upwards,” her posture is statue-like and her encasement sculptural, carefully designed for the purpose of exhibit (DeLillo 2016: 258). Isolated so as to stand out from the many rows of pods surrounding her, with an open space next to her clearly provided for Ross’s body, her quasi-entombment might be intended as a monumental reflection of her stature but ends up as a statement of economic privilege and immense financial wealth. Recalling the royal mortuary rituals of mummification in ancient Egypt, the iconic speculative ekphrasis of the body in the pod reflects a stratification according to the hierarchies of modern capitalism, which now extends from its late period and into infinity.

The iconic qualities of the image are reflected in the fact that it appears in the literary narrative as object and projection, through observation, memory, and recollection, and thereby through an ekphrastic evocation that simultaneously involves the graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, and verbal image, and thus its persistence through time. Following up on his influential mid-1980s delineation of a family tree of images, W. J. T. Mitchell helpfully distinguishes between “image” and “picture” in *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005) and more recently in *Image Science* (2015), an analytical move that enables him to address the pervasive life cycle of certain images: “The picture is a material object, a thing you can burn or break or tear. An image is what appears in a picture, and what survives its destruction – in memory, in narrative, in copies and traces in other media” (Mitchell 2015: 16). The body in the pod is an image that has the power to, in the words of Mitchell, “go on” (Mitchell 2005: 87); it is an image that has the capacity to “travel” across media (Vågnes 2011: 18). As an image, it is surrounded by paradox; it is immediately understandable, and, yet, in a sense unfathomable, “pure spectacle” and “visionary art,” and is thus constitutive of an aesthetic imaginary of immortality. It is also clearly an example of what Mitchell describes as a “metapicture” in the sense that it can be “employed as a device to reflect on the nature of pictures,” as it contributes substantially to Jeff’s reflections on human life, and thus to the meta-literary qualities of the novel (Mitchell 2015: 19).

When Jeff wanders among the gleaming pods in the eighth chapter of *Zero K*, the reader will have the chilling narrative that is “Artis Martineau” in mind, and so the body in the pod also becomes a tragic image of imprisonment and speechless isolation, of irreparable loss, so that the uncanny silence of rows and rows of pods appears foreboding in a way that will be hard for Jeff to comprehend, but that will inform the reader’s experience of the passages in question. Artis’s traumatized language echoes through the second half of the novel, inevitably shaping how the reader “sees” her in the pod, bringing an element of dramatic irony

into the reading, since only we, and not Jeff, are privileged with knowing the voice of her awakened mind.

6 The self as brain and the minded animal: Concluding reflections

The final scene of *Zero K* finds Jeff on a crosstown bus in Manhattan, as “the streets were charged with the day’s dying light and the bus seemed the carrier of this radiant moment.” A boy in the back of the bus cries out as “the sun’s rays align with the local street grid,” a natural phenomenon that takes place “once or twice a year” (DeLillo 2016: 273):

The full solar disk, bleeding into the streets, lighting up the towers to either side of us, and I told myself that the boy was not seeing the sky collapse upon us but was finding the purest astonishment in the intimate touch of earth and sun. I went back to my seat and faced forward. I didn’t need heaven’s light. I had the boy’s cries of wonder. (DeLillo 2016: 274)

Jeff’s journey, which has brought him back to his home environments, is also a journey towards resolution, towards a way to live with the questions he has been pondering in the corridors of The Convergence and bedside with Artis, many of which revolve around what distinguishes “the person” from “the body” (DeLillo 2016: 139). The final, epiphanic moment of *Zero K* describes a strong sense of being in the world instigated by a shared, interhuman response to the novel’s final, resonant image of sunlight, concrete, and glass. The present, with the boy’s cries of wonder, is enough for Jeff; he does not need heaven’s light, the promise of transcendence.

In *The Posthuman View*, Hayles places her hope in

a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information techniques without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival. (Hayles 1999: 5)

Jeff’s repeated encounters with catastrophe footage and his climactic confrontation with the endless rows of frozen bodies places him in a position not of convergence, but of divergence, where two different views of human agency are recognized as incompatible. Rather than instigating collective or activist response, the traumatic images are projected in order to signal the option of an exit strat-

egy for the chosen few. In the end, they have the opposite effect on Jeff, whose return to his urban quarters is an active, ethical choice, since his own father offers him the option of joining him and his partner in cryopreservation storage.

In writing about science fiction in the early 1980s, Frederic Jameson insisted on the abilities of speculative writing “not to give us ‘images’ of the future – whatever such images might mean for a reader who will necessarily predecease their ‘materialization’ – but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization” (Jameson 1982: 151). Ultimately, the mobilization through speculative ekphrasis of the contrasting, but related, aesthetic imaginaries of global, ecological destruction on the one hand and life extension on the other, and their juxtaposition with a desensitized narrative of mental and physical dislocation, makes it reasonable to read *Zero K* as cultural critique. The novel quite explicitly sees the intensification of various strains of technological utopianism in response to the expansive narrativization of Anthropocene trauma and urges ethical questions concerning the relationship between their parallel emergence.

As Colin Milburn has pointed out, the very discourse of cryonics “makes no secret of its intimate relationship with science fiction; in fact, cryonics traces its conceptual origins to pulp magazines. [...] The posthuman future, it would seem, remakes old myths into technological realities” (Milburn 2014). In employing speculative aesthetic imaginaries, DeLillo inverts generic elements, and, I would argue, relates cryopreservation’s promise of rebirth to what German philosopher Markus Gabriel finds to be a neurocentric conflation of “mind” with “brain” in contemporary neuroscience, a prominent cultural notion that “the self is a brain” (Gabriel 2017: 21). Gabriel sees it as an important task of our century “to take a new look at our situation as minded animals”:

We must overcome materialism, which would have us believe that all that exists is what is found in the universe (in the sense of the reality of hard anonymous causes, of matter and energy), and which for that reason desperately seeks a conception of the mind that is able to reduce *Geist* to consciousness and then reduce consciousness to an electrical storming of neurons. We are citizens of many worlds, we move in the realm of ends. This provides us a series of conditions for freedom. (Gabriel 2017: 226)

Our self-conception and mental life, Gabriel stresses, and the ways in which we think about our own identity as “minded animals,” will always be affected by more than the neurochemistry of our brains. Having witnessed Artis’s descent into the netherworlds of an unknown future, it is this self-understanding that Jeff comes to peace with as *Zero K* draws to an end – as a citizen of many worlds.

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