A Metamodernist Reading of Don DeLillo's *Zero K*

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Abstract: This article offers a critical analysis of Don DeLillo's 2016 novel, *Zero K*, through the lens of a metamodernist framework. While DeLillo's work is often associated with either modernism or, predominantly, postmodernism, this study argues that in *Zero K*, he can be categorized as a metamodernist writer. Metamodernism, a term introduced and proposed by cultural theorists Vermeulen and Akker, is conceptualized as a mediation between modernism and postmodernism, amalgamating elements from both movements. *Zero K*, as we will discuss, exhibits a fluctuation between modernist and postmodernist characteristics, encompassing themes of optimism and pessimism, utopia and dystopia, irony and enthusiasm, belief and disbelief. Furthermore, it demonstrates a tendency towards presenting a genuine human experience in metamodernist fiction, accentuating empathy, sincerity, and interconnectedness in order to rehumanize the subject.

Keywords: Don DeLillo, metamodernism, modernism, postmodernism, *Zero K*

1. Introduction

1.1 Don DeLillo's association with either postmodernism or modernism

Renowned as one of the most prominent American writers, Don DeLillo is frequently referred to as a postmodern author whose literary works have been extensively scrutinized for their embodiment of postmodern elements, features, and techniques. In his early fiction, DeLillo's critique often employs the tools of "satire and dark humor," akin to literary figures such as Melville, Twain, and Pynchon, boldly confronting postmodernity's threat of transforming individuals into mere replicas of "Madison Avenue's idealized vision of America" (Duvall 2008:1-3). While primarily focusing on American postmodernity, DeLillo's social criticism in novels such as *Libra*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld* exemplifies Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction – a postmodern novel intertwining metafictional self-reflexivity with a probing exploration of official history.

DeLillo is widely recognized for his examination of American postmodernity, particularly the challenges of living in a postindustrial society dominated by media influence, where reality and representation blur, and mediated experiences are perceived as more authentic than actual reality (Duvall 2008: 4). DeLillo's postmodern inclinations are evident in works such as *Libra*, where characters like Nicholas Branch encapsulate metafictional perspectives, embracing postmodern uncertainty and refraining from imposing fixed meanings on events (Giaimo 2011: 2-3). *White Noise* also exemplifies this theme, delving into media saturation, hyperreality, and consumerism within American society, highlighting the overwhelming influx of unsettled and unreliable information in the postmodern era.

Some critics, however, argue that DeLillo aligns more closely with modernism. Phil Nel's *DeLillo and Modernism* provides evidence to support this claim, demonstrating DeLillo's utilization of John Dos Passos as a stylistic model for depicting the Kennedy shooting, and placing DeLillo's work within a modernist framework. DeLillo himself, despite reluctance to classify his work, concedes an affinity to modernism in relation to *Underworld*, suggesting that the novel might be the "last modernist gasp" (Duvall 2008: 11).

Despite this, DeLillo's works defy easy categorization as either modernist or postmodernist. In his recent writings from the twenty-first century on, a discernible shift in perspective is evident, moving away from a postmodern outlook towards a more post-postmodern stance. This transition in DeLillo's work signifies a complex evolution in his more recent literary endeavors. It is important to note that some of his works neither strictly align with a postmodernist perspective nor exhibit a dynamic interplay between modernism and postmodernism, but also explore themes such as *New Sincerity* or *New Romanticism*, which are not commonly explored in postmodern fiction.

1.2 A General background to metamodernism

In 1989, social theorist Francis Fukuyama had an article published in *The National Interest* entitled "The End of History," where he contended that with the "pending demise of the communist empire," History—with a capital H—had reached its culmination (Fukuyama 1989: xii). Fukuyama asserted that "there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions" since all significant questions had been resolved (Fukuyama 1989: xii). However, in 2012, Fukuyama revisited the subject in an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, called "The Future of History," acknowledging that his earlier declaration may had been premature. The alleged "unabashed victory of liberal democracy" had since come under scrutiny, as "democratic governments all over the world increasingly failed to deliver on their promises" and "most national economies have not proliferated but have stagnated or gone into long-term recessions" (qtd. in Akker and Vermeulen 2017: 2-3).

Assuming that history has indeed recommenced, the postmodern vernacular appears inadequate in addressing our transformed social landscape. Since the beginning of the millennium, several overlapping aesthetic phenomena have surfaced, including the "New Romanticism in the arts, the New Mannerism in crafts, [and] the New Sincerity in literature" (Akker and Vermeulen 2017: 2-3). Each of these movements endeavors to incorporate and, simultaneously, transcend postmodern stylistic and formal conventions, signaling a shift in the cultural zeitgeist.

1.3 Metamodernism as an oscillation between modern and postmodern

As Akker and Vermeulen (2010: 10) propose, the metamodern structure of feeling can be characterized as a dialectical movement, oscillating between opposing situations without fully aligning with either. This fluctuation is described as a "both-neither dynamic" that simultaneously evokes and negates, overcoming and

weakening dichotomies (Akker and Vermeulen 2010: 10). The concept of metamodernism not only serves as a model for artistic production but also provides a means to comprehend the significance of life and experience in the 20th century. Metamodernism encapsulates a pendular motion between postmodern and pre-postmodern tendencies, encompassing elements of irony and enthusiasm, sarcasm and sincerity, eclecticism and purity, deconstruction and construction, among others. This sensitivity extends beyond postmodernism, reflecting the recent changes in Western capitalist societies. Indeed, metamodernism's oscillation between these states does not seek to combine "the best of both worlds" but rather explores a realm that is neither superior nor inferior (Akker and Vermeulen 2010: 10-11).

1.4 The lack of human in contemporary novel, and the need to return to it

In metamodernist novels, feelings assume a pivotal role, as do other aspects of subjectivity, notably "the interpersonal construction of a sense of self—a turn towards the human" (Timmer 2010: 22). As Timmer (2010: 24) points out, rather than presenting "fully human" characters, contemporary novels—particularly those penned by young American novelists—often feature "vivacious caricatures" that inhibit readers from forming emotional connections with these characters. The literary critic James Wood argues that "something is missing and that lack is the human." The deformations felt in contemporary novels, he contends:

> flow from a crisis that is not only the fault of the writers concerned, but is now of some lineage: the crisis of character, and how to represent it in fiction. Since modernism, many of the finest writers have been offering critique and parody of the idea of the character, in the absence of convincing ways to return to an innocent mimesis (qtd. in Timmer 2010: 24-5).

The construction of identity is not an isolated process, as individuals are shaped by the perceptions of others (Timmer 2010: 342). Metamodernism accentuates the significance of empathy within this interconnected framework, recognizing that sociality and connectivity do not necessitate complete like-mindedness or sameness. Through an examination of post-postmodernist novels, Timmer (2010: 351) suggests that these works point to the need for reconceptualizing "the enclosed and solipsistic universe as a dual universe, as shareware, or as a potential structure of we." By underscoring receptivity, reciprocity, and openness, these narratives signify a departure from postmodernism's preoccupation with self-obsession and self-deconstruction, thereby attempting to "re-humanize the subject" (Timmer 2010: 352). This is achieved by dedicating more narrative space to emotions, experiential reality, and the potential connections between self and other. Timmer (2010: 46), eventually draws the conclusion that:

> Self-narratives in these contemporary novels eventually seem to be structured not around a centered and stable self-concept, but are constructed, primarily, around feelings which, once shared, can lay the

> foundation, possibly, for beginning to make sense of what it means to be me.

Therefore, metamodernist fiction distinguishes itself by prioritizing narratives centered around subjects that diverge from the isolated and passive portrayal commonly found in postmodernist works. Instead, these subjects are characterized by their social nature, empathy, and desire for integration within their respective communities.

2. Analyzing the novel in the light of metamodernism

2.1 Utopianism in *Zero K*

Modernism was marked by a belief in utopia, as it embraced the notion that the realm of science, which had significantly improved the quality of life, was limitless in its pursuit and application of knowledge. Science-based technology was seen as the driving force behind modern progress. However, it became apparent that advancements in science and technology did not automatically translate to improvements in moral, social, and political spheres. Condorcet argued that while history demonstrated forward momentum, this progression was the result of a dialectical process that could produce unforeseen outcomes, with good emerging from evil and vice versa. Thus, human progress was intertwined with suffering, and the fruits of progress were achieved sporadically (qtd. in Waters 2006: 13).

Considered "a quasi-apocalyptic narrative" (Schaberg 2017: 76), the novel promotes the idea of utopia and a golden age, with the Convergence being portrayed as a realm where nothing is purely speculative, "nothing is wishful or peripheral. Men, women. Death, life. Faith-based technology" (DeLillo 2016: 10). The project's architects aim to "design a response to whatever eventual calamity may strike the planet" (DeLillo 2016: 49), as they assert that, at some point in the future, "death will become unacceptable even as the life of the planet becomes more fragile" (DeLillo 2016: 49). The members, as Wolf (2022: 126) puts it, attempt to "cheat death with pioneering methods of cryostasis." The Stenmark twins who are not scientists or social theorists but "adventurers of a kind" that Jeffrey "could not quite identify" (DeLillo 2016: 53) attempt to explain the activities within the compound:

> We want to stretch the boundaries of what it means to be human- stretch and then surpass. We want to do whatever we are capable of doing in order to alter human thought and bend the energies of civilization…. Death is a cultural artifact, not a strict determination of what is humanly inevitable (DeLillo 2016: 53).

Ross, Artis, and their fellow supporters place a strong emphasis on scientific pursuits and maintain an optimistic perspective on the advancements and accomplishments in the scientific field. In particular, they are convinced that they can overcome mortality and achieve eternal life through the innovative process of cryopreservation. Ross puts it clearly in his conversation with Jeffrey on the Convergence:

> They're making the future. A new idea of the future. Different from the others.… We fully expect that this site we occupy will eventually become

> the heart of a new metropolis, maybe an independent state, different from any we've known…This idea is a revelation to smart people in many disciplines. They understand that now is the time. Not just the science and technology but political and even military strategies. Another way to think and live (DeLillo 2016: 25-28).

Ross's firm belief in the Convergence's mission and its various initiatives serves as his primary means of validating the compound's pioneering efforts. His unwavering faith in the compound and its objectives is evident, as he not only upholds its mission but also actively encourages others to place their trust in cryopreservation. He fervently refers to it as "faith-based technology," and asserts that unlike previous belief systems, this one delivers tangible results (DeLillo 2016: 10).

However, when Jeffrey strolls among mannequins that seem to "represent the cryonic dead" (DeLillo 2016: 97), he, in stark contrast to what is purported to be performed in the Convergence, arrives at a kind of hell pit:

> Farther along, beyond the two rows of bodies, there was a floating white light and I needed to put a hand to my face when I drew near, deflecting the glare. 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 (DeLillo 2016: 97).

In this pivotal scene, Jeffrey shields his eyes from a disturbing glare that starkly juxtaposes the cryonically preserved individuals against the backdrop of the unredeemed masses who succumb to death and decay (Wolf 2022: 149). The novel employs the human body as its central theme, presenting various forms of corporeality - living, frozen, or lifeless - as immobile sculptures suspended in time. Within this context, the body is transformed into an exhibit, a museum artifact devoid of life and vitality, inviting contemplation and reflection (Glavanakova 2017: 103).

The characters involved in this endeavor exhibit a strong resistance to accepting their mortality, working relentlessly in the fields of science and art to prolong life itself, exclaiming "only life. Let it happen. Give us breath" (DeLillo 2016: 180). As one of the women, a key figure in this project, explains, "Human life is an accidental fusion of tiny particles of organic matter floating in the cosmic dust" (DeLillo 2016: 181). In this context, there is a notable absence of implausibility or impracticality within the compound, as an overarching atmosphere of hope and optimism pervades the setting. The woman continues:

> 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? If we tell ourselves forthrightly that consciousness will persist, that cryopreservatives will continue to nourish the body, it is the first awakening toward the blessed state. We are here to

> make it happen, not simply to will it, or crawl toward it, but to place the endeavor in full dimension (DeLillo 2016: 180).

The promotion of the Convergence heavily relies on exploiting the fear that the outside world is gradually being overshadowed by complex systems. These transparent networks gradually obstruct the natural and distinctive aspects of human nature and character, setting humans apart from mere elevator buttons and doorbells. The representatives of the Convergence paint a bleak picture of the future, predicting suffering, warfare, terrorism, famine, and drought, along with a loss of personal autonomy and a sense of being detached from physical existence. Astonishingly, they seem oblivious to the fact that their own project as Barrett (2018: 11) says, necessitates the complete surrender of humanity and an absolute dependence on technology. Furthermore, by showcasing images of natural and man-made disasters, war, and self-destruction, the videos serve as a form of propaganda, aiming to convince individuals that the world beyond the Convergence is no longer habitable. In essence, the activities carried out within the Convergence hold immense significance for the future of the world and its inhabitants, since technology, as one employee asserts, appears to be omnipresent and inescapable:

> Technology has become a force of nature. We can't control it. It comes blowing over the planet and there's nowhere for us to hide. Except right here, of course, in this dynamic enclave, where we breathe safe air and live outside the range of the combative instincts, the blood desperation so recently detailed for us, on so many levels (DeLillo 2016: 174).

DeLillo, based on the above discussion, delves into the complexities of human nature by portraying how science and technology have intertwined the boundaries between the natural and the artificial. In his novel, he illustrates a world where these two elements clash and meld together (Glavanakova 2017:105), depicting a society that is both fearful of mortality and eager to turn to technology for resolutions, even salvation. Indeed, the writer "explores the distorted view of technology as another God which unlike other gods, is able to deliver salvation" (Casteluber and Fernandes 2021:518).

2.2 Optimism concerning human's future

Modernism's defining characteristic lies in its firm conviction that science and progress hold limitless potential. This unwavering optimism has emerged from remarkable technological advancements, ushering in an era of change that seeks to remove any barriers that may hinder individuals' daily lives.

DeLillo's *Zero K* portrays this modernist optimism with great clarity. The project's investors possess crucial resources, such as resilient energy sources, robust mechanized systems, and enhanced security measures (DeLillo 2016:25). With these tools, they envision themselves at the forefront of groundbreaking innovation, confident in their ability to achieve any objective because nothing appears beyond their reach. Integrating devices into the human body provides renewed components and pathways necessary for rejuvenation. Artis, a character facing numerous debilitating ailments, exemplifies this optimism with her readiness to embrace the future and to be used as a pioneering subject for preservation. She

initially has a number of questions for which she seeks to find answers: "Will my soul have left my body and migrated to another body somewhere? Or will I wake up thinking I'm a fruit bat in the Philippines? Hungry for insects" (DeLillo 2016: 37). However, she is eventually convinced to believe what is carried out in the Convergence ought to be regarded as "a work-in-progress, an earthwork, a form of earth art, land art" (DeLillo 2016: 11). She, indeed, evinces no trace of pessimism and disbelief:

> I will become a clinical specimen. Advances will be made through the years. Parts of the body replaced or rebuilt. Note the documentary tone. I've talked to people here. A reassembling, atom by atom. I have every belief that I will reawaken to a new perception of the world (DeLillo 2016: 36-37).

Another character is Ross, who, alongside his wife, firmly believes in the procedures performed within the Convergence, envisioning a prosperous future for Artis and other individuals desiring preservation for future restoration. He interprets the transition from one life stage to another as a gateway to a more enduring and secure future. He boasts that: "What's happening in this community is not just a creation of medical science" as "there are social theorists involved, and biologists, and futurists, and geneticists, and climatologists, and neuroscientists, and psychologists, and ethicists, if that's the right word" (DeLillo 2016: 27).

The purpose of their presence is to reassess every aspect concerning the culmination of life, and they will manifest themselves in a cyberhuman state within a universe that will communicate with them in a profoundly distinct manner. Once the cryonicists have assimilated the future, the universe will cease to be apathetic and instead direct its attention towards them. The ontological and disheartening outlook of modernity will undergo a complete reversal. As Stenmark twins, the chief theoreticians elaborate on, here they are "speaking into the future, to those who may judge us as brave or quaint or foolish." Thus, two possibilities are considered. Either rewriting "the future, all our futures, and ended with a single empty page," or being "among those few who altered all life on the planet, for all time to come" (DeLillo 2016: 53). Stenmark twins opt for the latter.

At another point in the novel, one of the Convergence's officials attempts to reassure individuals who are on the brink of preservation that they will not experience "total darkness and utter silence…. You will have a phantom life within the braincase. Floating thought. A passive sort of mental grasp. Ping ping ping. Like a newborn machine (DeLillo 2016: 169).

Upon awakening, those preserved will possess a thorough understanding and awareness of their surroundings. As Wolf (2022: 128) observes, the heightened state of consciousness resulting from this linguistic reset will empower the preserved to discard analogy and forge a connection with the future. Consequently, neither pessimism nor hesitation is found among the project's participants. They all eagerly welcome cryonics, hoping to be revived in the future.

2.3 The significance of ordinariness

In literary modernism "ordinary experience" is of great significance (Olson 2009: 3). However, the prevalence of ordinariness has often been neglected, mainly due to the fact that critics have overwhelmingly regarded literary modernism "as a movement away from the conventions of nineteenth-century realism and toward an aesthetic of self- conscious interiority" (Olson 2009: 3). On this account, the best moments of literary modernism are those of "transcendent understanding." These crucial moments amplify "an awareness of the self, a coming into being of the individual, and an opening up of interior states of knowing."

The modernist tendency to stay within the consistency of the ordinary usually rises out of a reaction to what is regarded as the "hollowness of modern life, the loss of abstract ideals in which to believe, and the difficulty of really knowing another person" (Olson 2009: 28). Ordinary experience, in this sense, is similar to Wittgenstein's conception of "ordinary language." Wittgenstein does not claim that ordinary language is something different from what we know it to be, nor that words have some purer, more abstract meaning detached from the way we utilize them; "but ordinary language is all right" (qtd. in Olson 2009: 28). Therefore, the meaning of what we say, according to Wittgenstein, lies in how we say it, in the grammar of language. Wittgenstein's ordinary consists of the language that we actually use when communicating with each other:

> A word hasn't got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word really means. A word has the meaning someone has given to it (Olson 2009: 4).

Likewise, common occurrences such as the daily tasks we perform, hold importance and are valuable in their practicality and meaning. The routines we engage in on a regular basis often go unnoticed, yet they contribute significantly to the value, significance, and meaning of our lives.

In spite of encompassing numerous postmodernist traits, including pessimism, skepticism, and the acknowledgement of science's inability to secure a promising future, Jeffrey occasionally derives enjoyment from the routines of life and commonplace experiences:

> Ordinary moments make the life. This is what she knew to be trustworthy and this is what I learned, eventually, from those years we spent together…. Things people do, ordinarily, forgettably, things that breathe just under the surface of what we acknowledge having in common. I want these gestures, these moments to have meaning, check the wallet, check the keys, something that draws us together, implicitly, lock and relock the front door, inspect the burners on the stove for dwindling blue flame or seeping gas. These are the soporifics of normalcy, my days in middling drift (DeLillo 2016: 79, 148-9).

The excerpt above highlights Jeffrey's pursuit of meaningful and life-affirming experiences through seemingly ordinary acts like checking his wallet or verifying the security of the door (Cofer 2018: 10). He is dedicated to infusing his life with significance and value.

2.4 Pessimism and skepticism in *Zero K*

Pessimism permeates the essence of postmodernism, as it contends that science has failed to enhance the lives of individuals. While modernism boasted the superiority of the present civilization over its predecessors in terms of knowledge and technological sophistication, postmodernism challenges this notion of progress (Sim 2011: 285). Postmodernism raises doubts about the concept of an inevitable march towards progress and questions the wisdom of ceaselessly exploiting the environment without considering its long-term repercussions (Sim 2011: 286). Consequently, postmodernism dismisses the idealistic utopia pursued by modernism, as science and technology have proven incapable of bestowing upon humanity a better and more serene existence. The distinction between postmodernism and its critics becomes evident in postmodernism's deliberate departure from modernism's utopian ideals. While modernism was driven by visions of a better world, postmodernism seeks to transcend modernism by renouncing the practice of evaluating our current reality against an idealized vision (Glavanakova 2017: 104). This rejection is seen as the ultimate transgression of modernism, which postmodernism aims to supersede.

Jeffrey serves as the embodiment of postmodern thought in *Zero K*, assuming the role of "the critical observer and the agnostic" (Glavanakova 2017: 104). His skepticism and cynicism towards the Convergence and the prospect of revival through science and technology set him apart from other characters, emphasizing his postmodern perspective:

> Do you think about the future? What will it be like to come back? The same body, yes, or an enhanced body, but what about the mind? Is consciousness unaltered? Are you the same person? You die as someone with a certain name and with all the history and memory and mystery gathered in that person and that name. But do you wake up with all of that intact? Is it simply a long night's sleep?... I think you've been brainwashed (DeLillo 2016: 82-86).

On another occasion, while wandering through the corridors, Jeffrey attempts to infuse significance into his surroundings, striving to bring coherence to the place or simply find his own place within it. To his dismay, he encounters what he refers to as 'mannequins' - lifeless figures lacking both brains and organs. Doubtful of the activities unfolding in the edifice, he struggles to convince himself of the potential for science to enhance human life:

> The fact that these individuals, these heralds, had chosen to be rendered dead well before their time. The fact that their bodies had been emptied of indispensable organs. The fact of containment, alignment, bodies set in assigned positions. Woman man woman. It occurred to me that these were humans as mannequins (DeLillo 2016: 104).

Delving into the project with greater contemplation, Jeffrey questions whether or not the corporeal structure being engineered by the self-proclaimed scientists at the Convergence can truly be defined as a body. Such contemplation,

says Vagnes (2020: 38), inevitably leads to a philosophical exploration of the complex interplay between life and death. Jeffrey narrates that:

> The other thing I didn't know was what constituted the end. When does the person become the body? There were levels of surrender, I thought. 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 the occasion required. Doctors, lawyers, theologians, philosophers, professors of ethics, judges and juries (DeLillo 2016: 100).

Jeffrey strongly opposes the project and the involvement of billionaires in their attempt to outsmart death through the construction of the Convergence. This structure, dubbed "an ark for the 1 percent" by Mark Medley (qtd. in Herren 2021: 191), is designed to delay death at any cost. Jeffrey is portrayed as a key figure representing DeLillo's skepticism. The facility houses mannequins and cryopreserved human bodies as artistic displays, symbolizing a transition to the afterlife. However, Jeffrey questions the potential future of centralized control over individuals, raising concerns about the loss of humanity in exchange for immortality.

2.5 The significance of sharing in the novel

Another common trait found in numerous novels classified as metamodernist is the concept of 'sharing', as pointed out by Timmer (2010: 359). This involves the act of "sharing stories" to establish a connection with others (and vice versa); enabling individuals to relate to your narrative. This aspect plays a crucial role in reaffirming the validity and credibility of one's emotions and ideas, ultimately aiding in the formation of a coherent identity and a significant self-narrative. Timmer (2010:359) argues that the metamodernist novel highlights the importance of seeking community or social bonds, referring to it as a structural necessity for a sense of belonging- "a structural need for a we" (Timmer 2010:359). Additionally, by sharing thoughts or experiences, individuals not only enrich the world but also become intertwined with a supportive community of like-minded individuals.

In contrast, postmodern fiction often implies that being "truly human is pathetic" (Timmer 2010: 51). Revealing genuine emotions may be perceived as weakness or excessive sentimentality. The critic James Wood views this as a lack of humanity in fiction, attributing it to authors' inability or unwillingness to depict authentic characters and experiences (as cited in Timmer 2010: 51). The reemergence of human-centered approaches in both fiction and theory reflects a desire to address neglected aspects of subjectivity in postmodern literature and theory. This renewed focus signifies a substantial shift in understanding the self and constructing narratives within a post-postmodern context (Timmer 2010: 51-52).

Jeffrey's inclination towards forming connections and engaging in meaningful conversations is evident throughout *Zero K*. His emotional support often comes from his relationship with Emma, who has faced challenges such as raising an adopted son, a failed marriage, and working with disadvantaged children.

Their bond highlights the significance of social connections and emotional support in constructing a sense of self within a post-postmodern world:

> We weren't married, we didn't live together but we were braided tight, each person part of the other. This is how I thought of it. An intuitive link, a reciprocal, one number related to another in such a way that when multiplied together, day or night, their product is one... She was my lover. The idea alone consoled me, the word itself, lover, the beautiful musical note, the hovering letter V.... If I'd never known Emma, what would I see when I walk the streets going nowhere special, to the post office or the bank…. I sense her, feel her, I know that she occupies something within me that allows these moments to happen, off and on, streets and people (DeLillo 2016: 125, 133, 139).

Acknowledging that our perspective of the world is not solely shaped by our own beliefs, experiences, and concerns, but also by the relationships we form with others is crucial (Barrett 2018: 117). As evidenced in the detailed quote above, Jeffrey understands the importance of embracing diversity and maintaining an open attitude towards being understood by others as a means of affirming his place within his community.

Somewhere else in the novel, Jeffrey acknowledges the pre-eminence of her mother's presence in forming relationship and expressing sympathy for others' grieves and misfortunes:

> I'd never felt more human than I did when my mother lay in bed, dying. This was not the frailty of a man who is said to be "only human," subject to a weakness or a vulnerability. This was a wave of sadness and loss that made me understand that I was a man expanded by grief. There were memories, everywhere, unsummoned. There were images, visions, voices and how a woman's last breath gives expression to her son's constrained humanity (DeLillo 2016: 177).

Barrett (2018: 177) posits that the "suppression of otherness" exposes us to sorrow but also allows for personal growth, as seen in Jeffrey's transformation following his mother's death. Her passing becomes the catalyst for his development into a more fully realized individual, suggesting that death imbues life with meaning, and is an essential aspect of the human experience (Herren 2021: 225). Jeffrey expresses this idea when describing his mother as both ordinary and uniquely spirited, symbolizing safety and comfort.

Furthermore, Jeffrey appreciates the importance of "sharing stories" to connect with others and enable them to relate to his experiences. This reciprocal exchange helps affirm the consistency and authenticity of one's emotions and thoughts, emphasizing the significance of community and social interaction in metamodernist fiction – "a structural need for a we" (Timmer 2010: 359). The following extract is worth noticing:

> I described the details of several job interviews to Emma, who enjoyed my accounts of the proceedings—voice imitations, sometimes verbatim, of interviewers' remarks. She understood that I was not ridiculing these men and women. This was a documentary approach to a special kind of dialogue

> and we both knew that the performer himself, still jobless, was the subject of the piece. (DeLillo 2016: 140-1)

Glavanakova (2017: 106) contends that *Zero K* underscores the depth of human desire for belief, demonstrating how individuals form connections and solidify their sense of belonging within a community by sharing personal stories and emotions.

Notwithstanding Jeffrey's skepticism and disbelief in the Convergence, there are some moments when he falters about his rejection of cryonics, which, as Wolf (2022: 138) writes, "yields a more nuanced picture." In the hospital section of the Convergence, for example, Jeffrey comes across a boy "accompanied by two hollow-bodied escorts…seated in a carrel, shiny and very still, motionless except for his mouth and eyes" (DeLillo 2016: 69). Jeffrey, while feeling pity for the creature, narrates that:

> The only thing I did was take his hand and wonder how much time remained to him. In his physical impairment, the nonalignment of upper and lower body, in this awful twistedness I found myself thinking of the new technologies that would one day be applied to his body and brain, allowing him to return to the world as a runner, a jumper, a public speaker. How could I fail to consider the idea, even in my deep skepticism? (DeLillo 2016: 69)

As the above passage illustrates, even the skeptical, pessimist Jeffrey is not able to overlook the prospect of returning to life via state- of- the- art technology.

Conclusion

As discussed, and observed above, Don DeLillo in his 2016 novel, *Zero K*, can be considered a metamodernist writer due to the presence of certain elements and characteristics from both modernism and postmodernism. On the one hand, the novel exhibits modernist traits such as optimism and a belief in a promising future achieved through advancements in technology and science. The characters in the novel embody these modern beliefs and tendencies, holding optimistic views regarding science and technology, and envisioning a utopian future for humanity. It further accentuates the need for connectivity, and sociality. On the other hand, the only person in the novel who endorses postmodern predilections and attitude is the narrator, Jeffrey, who contrary to others, does not hold optimistic views and is against the idea of preserving bodies in order to be returned to life in the future. Thus, the novel often fluctuates between modernism and postmodernism, between hope and melancholy, between optimism and pessimism, between apathy and enthusiasm.

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