Text Matters, Number 15, 2025
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.15.22

Agnieszka Jagła
University of Lodz

Redefining Death in *Zero K* by Don DeLillo

ABSTRACT

Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) focuses on the possibility of overcoming death through cryonics. The narrative is set primarily in the Convergence—a facility which utilises cryonics to provide its subjects with the possibility of life extension, and a promise of a better life in the future. The result is achieved by removing the subjects' internal organs and keeping them alive in a state of life suspension, in an attempt to renegotiate the limits of human existence. As his father and stepmother become patients of the Convergence, the protagonist of the novel, Jeff Lockhart, grapples with the questions of life and death. The paper analyses the theme of death in the novel from the posthumanist perspective of Rosi Braidotti's text "The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible," and compares it with the pursuit of immortality highlighted by the transhumanist movement. The secondary purpose of this paper is to investigate how the novel redefines grief by using the framework provided by Monika Rogowska-Stangret's ethical stance presented in *Być ze świata (Being-of-the-World)*.

Keywords: DeLillo, *Zero K*, cryonics, death, transhumanism, posthumanism, Braidotti.

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 24 Oct. 2024. Verified: 20 May 2025. Accepted: 27 May 2025.

Don DeLillo's novel *Zero K* (2016) considers different ethical attitudes to life and death in the context of cryonic preservation, and explores the idea of people wrestling with their mortality by offering characters the possibility of life extension through technology. In the novel, it is the Convergence Institute which is the provider of this life-suspending procedure. The promise of resurrection—a return from the cryonic state in an unspecified future—offered by the Institute is not available to many, but merely to the privileged, wealthier part of society, including the Lockhart family. The protagonist of the novel, 34-year-old Jeffrey Lockhart, is the son of billionaire Ross Lockhart. Jeff's life changes radically when he is invited to travel with his father from New York to the Convergence located somewhere between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The readers follow Jeff as he accompanies his father, Ross Lockhart, and his wife, Artis Martineau, during their preparations and the final cryonics procedure at the Institute. Jeff's reservations about the place are contrasted with his father and stepmother's firm belief in being brought back to life and becoming part of the Convergence's society of the future. Surprisingly, the events at the Convergence are interrupted by Ross's change of heart. Jeff and Ross return to New York, where the novel shifts its attention to Jeff's everyday life and his relationship with his girlfriend Emma and her adopted son Stak. Soon after, however, Jeff's relationship with Emma becomes strained as Stak decides to join the Ukrainian army and Ross once again decides to undergo cryopreservation. Both Ross and Jeff return to the Institute where the protagonist witnesses his father's procedure at the Convergence and Stak's death displayed on one of the screens of the facility.

While in an interview DeLillo agrees with Peter Boxall and sees *Zero K* as a "departure from the novels of the earlier decade" ("Interview" 161), critics continue to find parallels between the novel and the writer's oeuvre. In *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (2006), published before *Zero K*, Boxall argues that "DeLillo's fiction suggests a deep underlying connection between technology, violence and capital, a connection which undermines the possibility of historical progression" (7); nineteen years and four novels later the claim still proves accurate. DeLillo himself contends that "*Zero K* is a leap out of the bare-skinned narratives of *Point Omega* and *The Body Artis*t" ("Interview" 160), whereas Sonia Front sees it rather as a transition from *Point Omega*'s "exhausted consciousness . . . into the posthuman development of consciousness in the cryonic afterlife" (496–97). Nathan Ashman notes a similar transition between *White Noise* and *Zero K*: in *White Noise* Jack and Babette dream of immortality, while in *Zero K* those dreams become real (301). Laila Sougri, in turn, traces the similarities of *Zero K* to one of DeLillo's earliest novels—*Ratner's Star* (1976) and compares the motivations of their characters: "Endor and Ross

share their Faustian need to push the limits of technological possibility and to mobilize the necessary means to achieve their goals" (17). Indeed, the preoccupation with technology, which continues throughout DeLillo's literary career, has become a defining theme of his writing.

DeLillo's exploration of mortality in *Zero K* has previously been discussed from both posthumanist and transhumanist standpoints by several critics, including Erik Cofer, Kahina Enteghar and Amar Guendouzi, Lovro Furjanić, Stefan Herbrechter, Lay Sion Ng, Laila Sougri, and Philipp Wolf.[1] This paper extends those discussions and argues that *Zero K* can be read as a novel that illustrates the clashing perspectives of transhumanism—represented in the text by life-extending practices of cryonics, and posthumanism—in particular, the concept of death as formulated by Rosi Braidotti. Moreover, in its contemplation of mortality, the novel contributes original perspectives on grief and victimhood to the ongoing discussion between the aforementioned philosophical movements. I argue that in this aspect, DeLillo exposes the shortcomings of both, and in turn comes to a conclusion which closely resembles Monika Rogowska-Stangret's[2] ethical standpoint on the "insolubility of death" (46).

The most well-known advocate for the transhumanist movement and its biggest propagator nowadays is Max More, President of Alcor Life Extension Foundation and one of the editors of *The Transhumanist Reader*, a collection of texts encompassing the essential thought of the movement. The core beliefs of transhumanism are morphological freedom, seen as enhancement, both cognitive and physical, and life-prolonging practices in various forms, spanning from mind-uploading, through gene editing, to cryonics. Transhumanism was shaped by the inventions and ideas of the second half of the 20th century. As More argues, it was Robert Ettinger, the founder of cryonics, who propagated the early ideas of life extension that defined the movement (11). Ettinger himself discusses his project as follows: "At very low temperatures it is possible, right now, to preserve dead people with essentially no deterioration, indefinitely" and explains that "[i]f civilization endures, medical science should eventually be able to repair almost any damage to the human body, including freezing damage and senile debility or other cause of death" (qtd. in More 11). While cryonics is only one of many ideas propounded by transhumanism, life extension practices aimed at achieving immortality are the cornerstone of the movement.

---

[1] Laila Sougri, Kahina Enteghar, and Amar Guendouzi analyse *Zero K* from the posthumanist perspective, Lay Sion Ng, Lovro Furjanić, and Philipp Wolf from the transhumanist one. Stefan Herbrechter and Eric Cofer synthesise the approaches of both movements.

[2] All the fragments from *Być ze świata* (*Being-of-the-World*) by Rogowska-Stangret are translated by me. The title itself is inspired by Karen Barad's article "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter."

The transhumanist quest for immortality can be viewed as contradictory to Braidotti's concept explored in "The Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible." Published in the collection *Deleuze and Philosophy* (2006), her essay may be considered one of the most formative texts in her career. Braidotti adopts Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becoming-imperceptible and presents it as a moment of transition between life and death; she redefines death as another form of becoming where one can embrace the new, "imperceptible" version of the self. Becoming-imperceptible is present in Braidotti's other works, such as *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* from the same year, and in *The Posthuman* (2013), where she connects becoming-imperceptible with posthuman ethics. She explains it as follows:

> What we truly desire as humans is to disappear, to step on to the side of life and let it flow by, without actually stopping it: becoming imperceptible. And yet our fundamental drive (*conatus*) is to express the potency of life (*potentia*), by joining forces with other flows of becoming. The great animal-machine universe is the horizon of becoming that marks the eternity of life as Bios-Zoe and its resilience, its generative power expressed also through what we humans call death. ("The Ethics" 153)

Braidotti defines becoming-imperceptible as a positive form of metamorphosis, which encourages one to understand death as the moment when one transcends the human/nonhuman boundary through death. She views death as a unity of all beings, "the point of fusion between the self and his/her habitat, the cosmos as a whole" (154). However, Braidotti acknowledges that *dying*, or, as she sees it, *becoming*, necessitates the sacrifice of the human sense of self: "At that point of becoming-imperceptible, all a subject can do is mark his/her assent to the loss of identity (defined as a by-product of *potesas*) and respectfully merge with the process itself, and hence with his/her environment" (157). The concept reframes death as the end of life as an individual, and the entry into a new beginning as a part of the collective.

This model constitutes a polar opposite to the one based on quasi-transhumanist enhancements aimed at prolonging life, and can be used as a framework for a critical reading of *Zero K*, a novel which, similarly to Braidotti's project, investigates the elite's drive for immortality. However, I supplement it with Rogowska-Stangret's discursive ideas, which, in turn, bring attention to and resolve the shortcomings of both Braidotti's and the transhumanist models. In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti connects becoming-imperceptible with posthuman theory, viewing them as compatible:

> Posthuman death theory as a vital continuum could not be further removed from the notion of death as the inanimate and indifferent state of matter, the entropic state to which the body is supposed to "return." It

> rather spells desire as plenitude and over-flowing, not as lack. Death is the becoming-imperceptible of the posthuman subject and as such it is part of the cycles of becoming, yet another form of interconnectedness, a vital relationship that links one with other, multiple forces. The impersonal is life and death as bios/zoe in us—the ultimate outside as the frontier of the incorporeal: becoming-imperceptible. (137)

The abovementioned dichotomy between the human individual and the collective is the incentive for Rogowska-Stangret's disagreement with Braidotti. The Polish philosopher argues that, instead of narrowing the divide between the human and the nonhuman realms, the distinction Braidotti makes between human life and *zoe*, deepens it further: "The opposition between the human and *zoe* seems problematic, as on the one hand it establishes the vision of the human as a narcissist . . . and, on the other hand, of life (*zoe*) as a dominant cosmic power, which erases everything human" (39). It is the obliteration of the human experience in favour of becoming-imperceptible that Rogowska-Stangret considers problematic. Braidotti's main objective is a redefinition of death as "becoming-imperceptible"; in doing so, she wishes to illustrate the possibility that "[s]omething in our existence will go on after death, but it is not the continued existence of the self" ("The Ethics" 149). Rogowska-Stangret's disagreement with Braidotti stems from the fact that Braidotti presents death as objectively positive and as a relevant addition to the posthuman rhetoric of death:

> I believe that instead of aiming at the dissolution of death in life, we should make death forever insoluble—a moment of indigestible difference, the most radical otherness which accompanies every metamorphosis, every metabolism. That is why I think it is not always possible to turn negativity into positivity, at least not from an ethical point of view. Because the positivity with which we are left contains the shadow of negativity; it is not clear light, clear positivity. Ethics, in its attempts to compensate (or merely recognise the wrongdoings), demands that we leave some matters indigestible. (Rogowska-Stangret 46)

Rogowska-Stangret radically disagrees with Braidotti's notion of treating death as a process of becoming; she views Braidotti's concept as possibly threatening the ethical perspective on remembering the past, and as unsatisfactory in the context of posthumanist ethics (22–23). In response to Braidotti's theory, she introduces the term "bare death" as a counterpoint to the "violence" of forgetting or obliterating the trauma and history of the past. Braidotti's and Rogowska-Stangret's beliefs are representative of the posthumanist stance and are contrasted with a more transhumanist approach, which views death as optional.

Both the posthumanist and the transhumanist perspectives can be found in DeLillo's novel, and are presented as opposites. Herbrechter, Sougri, and Ng argue that *Zero K* juxtaposes the transhumanist pro-cryonics views professed by the Convergence believers, including Ross and Artis, with the posthumanist anti-cryonics attitude of the protagonist. Ross and Jeff become representative of the abovementioned philosophies and are positioned at the opposite ends of the spectrum. Thus, Jeff's need for connection and relationship with others and the outside world is indicative of posthumanism, whereas his father, who views himself as a man of progress and approaches the idea of cryonics in a seemingly scientific spirit, can be seen as a proponent of transhumanism. Interestingly, *Zero K* points out the blatant religious aspect of the transhumanist stance, and the simultaneous lack thereof in posthumanism. However scientific Ross's arguments may seem, when juxtaposed with his son's more secular, critical perspective on the Convergence's mission, Ross's thinking reveals a clear spiritual undertone. Thus, apart from posthumanism and transhumanism, the sacral and the technological aspects in the novel are inextricably linked: "For DeLillo, death is no longer envisaged in terms of religion alone but in terms of technology as well" (Sougri 184–85). Even though Ross tries to justify his choice by resorting to scientific arguments, the facility's design encourages viewing cryonics almost as a religious system, referred to as "faith-based technology" (DeLillo, *Zero K* 9).

By applying a design that enhances the spiritual connotations of immortality, the novel juxtaposes the reality of "dying" inside and outside of the Convergence. The Institute creates a visual spectacle necessary to maintain a shrine-like atmosphere through its still and quiet interiors. This aesthetic layer leads patients to believe that the transhumanistic procedure of cryonics is preferable to facing the problems and complexities of the outside world. Simultaneously, the screens at the Institute display apocalyptic images which disturb the meditative atmosphere of the place:

> 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. (Vågnes 34)

The artworks and images in the Convergence are puzzling for the protagonist, as they significantly differ from the overall aesthetics of the place. The videos move Jeff emotionally and cause him to reflect upon the meaning behind the installations. Paul Sheehan compares the screens in the novel to the cinematic fascination with the portrayal of death:

"[T]he posthumanist machinations of the plot—technology as the conduit to immortality, taking control of the forces of life—are matched by a post-cinematic concern with the plasticity of the video image" (1701). He suggests an intricate relationship between film and what it displays, as it has the power to freeze the moments of life, and hence death, and make them eternal. By evoking the "plasticity of the video image," Sheehan points out the manipulative aspect of cinema and underlines how deceitful the videos on the screens can appear. The cruelty displayed in the video installations at the Institute, which I analyse later in the article, enhances the contrast between the outside world and the place itself; thus, it stimulates the spectators to long for an escape from morbid reality. The outside environment is shown as barbaric, while the Institute provides a safe shelter for its patients.

The aesthetics of the Institute facility seem to obscure or eradicate Braidotti's concept of "becoming-imperceptible," challenging the logic of this idea of self-perpetuation pledged by the Institute, while her argument that "all we long for is to lie silently and let time wash over us in the perfect stillness of not-life" ("The Ethics" 152) seems to be in line with the promise of the Convergence's eternal sleep. The philosopher underlines that even though life aspires to be "self-perpetuated," it inevitably leads to death (ibid.). The founders of the Convergence, on the other hand, believe in the sustenance of human existence by retaining the body; they aspire to gain control over death by dismissing the impermanence of human life in its bodily form. This approach to death is radically different to Braidotti's, as by preserving the body intact, cryonics disables the possibility of the Braidottian becoming. The philosopher argues:

> Life being desire which essentially aims at extinguishing itself, that is, reaching its aim and then dissolving, the wish to die is another way to express desire to live. Not only is there no dialectical tension between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, but also the two forces are really just one—*Zoe* as a life-force aims to reach its own fulfilment. (151)

Rather than towards Braidotti's ethics, the Convergence leans towards the rhetoric of transhumanist philosophy, which proposes that, as "The Transhumanist Declaration" phrases it, humans should have the right to "preserve the self through cryonics" (Bostrom et al. 55). While the cryonic procedure does not necessarily promise immortality, as it only suspends human life in time, it relies on the premise that technological advancement will be able to make human life infinite. According to Front, this technological advancement is reminiscent of religious belief due to their common "motivator," which she argues is "the fear of death": "both

religion and technology have the same roots and purpose; they both strive for immortality and they are both based on faith" (496). This is emphasised in the novel by the aforementioned sacral aesthetics of the Convergence, and, in turn, contradicts Braidotti, who considers death to be the opening of a new chapter and maintains that life does not belong to the subject: "[T]he life in me is not mine" ("The Ethics" 152). However, she makes an exception to that rule, which I discuss in what follows.

By referring to André Colombat's view on Deleuze's suicide, Braidotti intends to show that death itself can and should become an affirmation of life even in the act of taking one's own life:

> Colombat . . . [l]inks the act of suppressing one's failing body, as in suicide or euthanasia, to an ethics of assertion of the joyfulness and positivity of life, which necessarily translates into refusal to lead a degraded existence. This notion rests on a preliminary and fundamental distinction between personal and impersonal death. The former is linked to the suppression of the individualised ego, the latter is beyond the ego: a death that is always ahead of me. (146)

This example can be compared to the stance of one of the characters in *Zero K*, Artis, who refuses to continue a "degraded existence" on a similar premise to Deleuze. While in Deleuze's case the suicide can be viewed as an affirmation of *potentia*, Artis opts for cryonics as a way to sustain her life. However, this is only partially true, as Artis also wishes to become part of the facility's visionary mission. Her choice of cryonics can then be viewed as an illustration of human megalomania, and not merely the refusal of a low-quality life of suffering from a chronic disease.

When comparing Ross's and Artis's decisions to self-style their "deaths," Adéle Nel considers Artis in a much more positive light as a woman battling sickness, for whom cryonics is a new chance at life. At the heart of Artis's intention lies a decision to fight for retaining her identity and against its gradual loss due to the progressing illness. To gain the chance of remaining her unaltered self in the face of becoming disabled, Artis has to sacrifice her present life and body. However, it seems that the character falls victim to the Convergence's transhumanist approaches to disability: "[D]isability becomes the outcome of a too-complacent posture toward death and 'technophobia'" (Hall 24). Melinda Gann Hall points out the risk of the transhumanists' view on disability, which she argues can extend into perceiving enhancement as synonymous with eugenics: "For the transhumanist, positive and negative eugenics are linked together. Transhumanism repeatedly treats the two as co-extensive: to rid the world of disability is to enhance the human being—

enhancement seems to require the rejection of disability and embodiment as risk and limitation" (23). As a result of her attempt to "save" herself, Artis becomes a disembodied consciousness trapped in the void and her intrapersonal experience, a bleak contrast to the Convergence's promise of a future life. Ross, on the other hand, represents for Nel the wealthy and privileged individual whose behaviour she sees as a manifestation of human egocentrism: "his narcissism and his desire to have control over all things, even over death itself" (5). This is manifested in inviting his son to the Convergence facility to keep him company, but also as a witness, whose presence makes his "death" more ceremonial and relevant.

Ross can here be seen as the Vitruvian man, an image that, for Braidotti, symbolises the exclusivity and domination of the white European male part of society over the other (*The Posthuman* 15). Ng points out that a similar marginalisation of the other is present and especially evident in the treatment of the human bodies in the Convergence. Through the unification of all the patients, through procedures such as shaving them or taking away their organs, the subjects become reified by being deprived of their characteristics. Ng underlines the importance of Ross and Artis exemplifying a male and female, heterosexual, white couple submitting to the Convergence:

> What is significant here is that their bodies once again echo the myth of Adam and Eve: a compulsory white heteronormative model. Just like the mannequins that are located in shopping malls in order to stimulate consumerism and to present an ideal version of masculinity or femininity, the bodies of Ross and Artis are being objectified and fetishized in order to stimulate the market of cryopreservation and to reaffirm heteronormative patriarchy and white supremacy. Meanwhile, their personhoods have become disembodied, suspended in ice. In this regard, the Convergence is neither moving toward posthuman nor postgender utopianism but moving backward to neoimperialism and patriarchy. (13)

The racism of the facility and its rejection of the variety of bodies can be seen in the procedure that Ng describes as "whitening" of the bodies (17). The "whitening" process becomes a means of control, allowing people to be in charge of their bodies. Ng claims that this can be viewed as a response to the anxiety associated with nature understood as Other, which remains uncontrollable and, therefore, poses a threat, while "human immortality is constructed upon the desire to control and the fear of otherness" (17). On the surface, the detachment from others and the outside might be viewed as an intentional shift of the Convergence's perspective back to the individual. However, through the literal deconstruction of the human

body, the separation of organs, shaving, and positioning it in the special pod in the same way, an individual is deprived of any characteristics and becomes just another body, not a part of the collective. The bodies of the Convergence become a physical representation of transhumanist thought, showing that transhumanism demands unification: "Western societies put a premium on individuality. This represents a problem for transhumanism, which has little attended to the Spinozist elements of its project. The transhumanist agenda implies the dwindling if not the end of individuality, as its modifications move people toward becoming identical types and interchangeable parts" (Frodeman 109). Such unification happens in the Convergence and reduces Ross and Artis to bodies in the pods; there is, however, a difference between their "deaths" as witnessed in the Institute, and the nameless deaths of the masses outside. The ignorance of the deaths outside the Convergence exemplifies that imperceptibility, in Rogowska-Stangret's words, can become "an act of cruelty" (23).

The only character who is able to notice death outside and inside the Institute is Jeff. When he recognises Stak, his girlfriend's son, in one of the films, he realises that while the screens are part of artistic installations, they might also show the reality of war in the outside world. This contrast illustrates that the Convergence's patrons hold a special, privileged status. The restricted availability of the services perpetuates the societal stratification of the capitalistic system. Seeing that "The Transhumanist Declaration" claims to support "the well-being of all sentience" (Bostrom et al. 54), Furjanić underlines the lack of inclusivity offered by the Convergence; he argues that as a result the project cannot be viewed as an egalitarian transhumanistic endeavour, since it is available only to those who can afford it. While transhumanism claims to preach inclusivity, it is not realistically achievable, as Furjanić rightly proves (509). However, I argue that *Zero K* can be seen as a critical illustration of what transhumanism might look like in practice by showing the contrast between the exclusive "deaths" of the rich and the plight of the masses. Stephanie Bender views this disparity as a result of biocapitalism:

> Unacceptable death . . . only refers to the death of some, namely super-rich individuals like Ross who can afford to be cryotechnologically preserved. This kind of death, or rather un-death, produced by biocapitalist biopolitics, finds itself in direct relation to the deaths of the masses of people, likewise produced by the biocapitalist regime. Ross's involvement in water privatisation and his profiting from natural disasters shows that turning the life of most into the profit of some will necessarily result in the destruction of the majority through ecocide and war. (193)

Bender underlines the absurdity of a situation in which the rich are not only able to profit from disasters and catastrophes but are also granted the privilege of escaping them through cryonics. Well-off individuals, such as Ross, are shielded by wealth and can escape "planetary woe" (DeLillo, *Zero K* 163). By disconnecting its patients from the external world, the Convergence represses the possibility of creating a Braidottian "continuum with Nature as One" ("The Ethics" 149). This is due to the design of the place and its separation, which is indicative of the human desire for control:

> Immortalists and all kinds of transhumanists want to cut off human development from nature, genetics and evolution, that is, the given actuality that hitherto proved uncontrollable and not at one's disposal. The fundamental rational is to prevail over the "complexities" of temporality. Classical aesthetics can be seen as (a more subtle) ideological precursor of that desire. (Wolf 143)

However, Ross denies this isolation and claims earth is "the guiding principle" behind the Convergence (DeLillo, *Zero K* 10).

While, on the surface, the statement "Return to the earth, emerge from the earth" (ibid.) may seem applicable to the Convergence's endeavour, the Institute fails to fulfil these promises. When compared with Braidotti's understanding of death as becoming one with Nature, it can be argued that the Convergence does not allow its patients to truly "return to the earth." For Ross and Artis, who decide to become a part of the Convergence, the state of "death" is impermanent, as they are waiting to be brought back into life. For Braidotti, on the other hand, death is the inevitable extinction of the self. When it comes to the environmental aspect of the Convergence, the isolation to which the facility aspires frees individuals from the feeling of guilt caused by their ecological impact but also restrains them from becoming part of the environmental collective as they die. Although presented as eco-friendly, cryonics is far from sustainable. The facility has to utilise a vast amount of energy resources to preserve the bodies intact. The consumption of energy resources regardless of its impact on the environment is indicative of human hubris and a yearning for ownership and control—human characteristics tightly connected to the marketing aspect of the Convergence. This circles back to the very beginning of the novel, when Ross expresses the opinion that the desire to self-style one's own death is in human nature. The character presents it as an urge that is impossible to fight against, an instinct more important than taking the environmental consequences of following it into consideration. In this way, what Alexandra K. Glavanakova calls "the unscrupulous commercialization of transactions involving the afterlife" (96) is present

already in the first lines of the novel, which illustrate the heightened importance of human life at the expense of the environmental other.

Besides engaging in cryonics, the Institute aspires to create a new society in the future with the Convergence's patients as its members. In this pursuit, however, the facility overlooks the environmental factor, and to fulfil its goal, it blurs the notion of time and space by disengaging the subjects from their outside world: "This is what we want, this separation. We have what is needed. Durable energy sources and strong mechanized systems. Blast walls and fortified floors. Structural redundancy. Fire safety. Security patrols, land and air. Elaborate cyberdefense. And so on" (DeLillo, *Zero K* 30). The separation is intentional on the Convergence's part; when Jeff mentions his concern about the lack of windows, Ross responds: "What's on the other side of a window? Pure dumb distraction" (43). This isolation from the outside world evokes different reactions in the two characters: it leads Ross to forget his ex-wife's first name, while on the other hand, Jeff keeps on recalling his past memories. This juxtaposition shows the difference in how the Facility influences characters depending on their eagerness or readiness to follow its ideals. The place itself and the idea behind it bring such a sense of discomfort to Jeff that it induces in him childhood memories of his mother, but also "foreshadows the harsh reality of transhumanist disembodiment that we witness in the 'Artis Martineau' section" (Cofer 467). This section is the novel's centrepiece and provides an insight into Artis's mind after the process of disembodiment. The mind-body separation of Artis shows the disconnect between the body and thoughts, which are presented as if they existed in a void: "Artis exists in a state of exhausting perpetuity, where all notions of boundary—time, space, the self—become violently and incomprehensibly dislodged" (Ashman 307). As N. Katherine Hayles argues, embodiment does not serve the purpose of distinguishing between genders or the animate from the inanimate, but "makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it" (xiv). Deprived of the context of her body and environment, Artis becomes a "self devoid of any content" (Front 499). An insight into the soliloquy of her floating mind, however, suggests that hope lies in the language "that holds the power to anchor her in time and space" (ibid.). Indeed, critics concur regarding the novel's "faith in language's ability to redeem and render the world legible" (Dini 2), which is professed by the protagonist and is "a long-standing theme in DeLillo" (Herbrechter 14). Isolated from external stimuli from the outside world, Artis is left merely with language. I return to the theme of language in the final part of the article, where I explore why Jeff's fascination with language is ultimately flawed.

By becoming patients of the Convergence, Artis and other members reject the outside world and the posthumanist chance for becoming-imperceptible. Braidotti argues that her concept of becoming has its roots in philosophical nomadism and "is rather linked to a sense of interconnectedness which can be rendered in terms of an ethics of eco-philosophical empathy and affectivity which cuts across species, space and time" ("The Ethics" 156). Here lies the important difference between Braidotti and Rogowska-Stangret mentioned at the beginning of the article. While both focus on the interrelation between the human and the nonhuman, Braidotti underlines the gap between the two. However, Rogowska-Stangret argues that "[b]eing-of-the world means that there is no qualitative difference between us and the world" (26). *Zero K*, in turn, draws a clear distinction between the human and the environment, and dismisses both Braidottian "interconnectedness" and Rogowska-Stangret's claim that the aforementioned difference is non-existent.

The Convergence's rejection of the outside world and other people is far from being a favourable image of the transhumanist Facility. It is through the character of Jeff, who does not decide to pursue cryonics himself, that readers are offered a more complex perspective on the consequences of embracing this technology. The protagonist is not a participant in the process, yet he remains a party deeply entangled with his family members—Ross and Artis, who undergo cryonics. He faces the perspective of a person awaiting the "death" of a relative and the grief that is to come: "Following in the footsteps of other literary forbearers, Charon and Virgil, Jeff chaperones the dead" (Barrett 122). By remaining an external spectator, Jeff has an entirely different role in the novel: he is a counterbalance to his father's and stepmother's view.

The protagonist's reserved feelings towards the Institute and life extension might falsely suggest that the novel aims to critique the Convergence and cryonics. However, the author himself denies having wanted to "convey a nostalgia for mortality" (DeLillo, "Interview" 162), which is represented by Jeff. DeLillo points out the complicated relationship between the son and the father as a reason for Jeff's prejudiced response to the Convergence (ibid.). For Jeff the idea that he might undergo the procedure with his father and stepmother is so abstract that he is unable even to consider it as a serious proposal on their part:

> Artis's unsmiling invitation for Jeffrey to join them—creating an immortal triumvirate—is deciphered by Jeffrey as purely in jest. Indeed, he never stops to consider that there may be a grain of sincerity to her overture. Jeffrey, it appears, chooses to dwell in the embodied and terminal networked society, thus establishing him as a counterweight to transhumanist ideals. (Cofer 468)

Despite accompanying his father and becoming a witness to his pursuit of immortality, Jeff remains prejudiced against the idea. The detachment from the outside world, mentioned earlier, is experienced by Jeff as distressing: "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" (Vågnes 36). The unease caused by the place itself, combined with the threat of losing his father to the Convergence, leads him to develop a limp—a psychosomatic sign dating back to his childhood trauma of his father abandoning Jeff and his mother. The threat of once again being left by his father brings back his childhood experience: "At the prospect of being abandoned a second time, he starts to act out his childhood traumas with still more intensity" (Laguarta-Bueno 123). As Jeff has to face the possibility of mourning the loss of the parent, he re-enacts the childhood behaviours he developed as a teenager.

Although indirectly, Jeff becomes the witness not only of the death of his relatives, but also of Stak, whose demise is displayed on one of the screens in the Convergence. The character of Stak embodies yet another way of dying, different from the already-discussed cryonic deaths. From the day he is born, Stak is a child stigmatised by war. Glavanakova points to the military conflict in Konstantinovka in 2014 and argues that it is through the character of Stak that DeLillo exemplifies "the intricate complexities of history and the endless power struggles" of Ukraine (94). The boy finds himself unable to adapt to his life in the American family and finally escapes his new home to join the army in Ukraine. Emma, Stak's foster mother, intuitively predicts that he will soon leave her; this expectation of loss is similar to the one that Jeff experiences awaiting his father's death. The example of Stak can be considered in the light of Rogowska-Stangret's stance on the exclusivity of agency that lies in self-styling one's death (a term also used by Braidotti) versus the passivity of accepting and experiencing death in the light of factors beyond an individual's control:

> Another important question arises: who can self-style their own death? In the face of the Holocaust, Chernobyl, PTSD, the sixth extinction, growing social inequalities, I wonder what it would be like to die on one's own terms. I argue that in such situations we are exposed to "inevitable passivity," which, among other things, makes it impossible for everyone to always and in any circumstances control or self-style their own death. (Rogowska-Stangret 43)

Rogowska-Stangret here puts forward the claim that, in the face of situations which can be referred to as "hyperobjects," self-styling one's death becomes

an impossibility. And while Stak can, in a way, be seen as a character who also "self-styles" his own death, it is dubious whether he truly had a choice and a possibility to start a new life in America and simultaneously forsake his roots and his homeland. Stak's death complicates the problem of grief even further; while both decisions are voluntary, Ross's choice is based on the belief that by sacrificing his present life, he will be able to renew it after being resurrected from cryonics in the future, whereas Stak gives up his life to become a soldier as a result of "radicalization" and "historical decisionism" (Wolf 149). Given that DeLillo makes a parallel between Stak's decision and Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi party, he is, however, far from presenting Stak's choice as "a preferable alternative to the Convergence" (ibid.). Referring to Stak's visit to an art gallery and his Heideggerian-inspired discussion with Jeff that "rocks are but do not exist" (DeLillo, *Zero K* 213), Wolf argues that this experience is an incentive for becoming involved in the war (149). Thus, both Stak's and Ross's decisions to self-style their deaths are based on completely different premises, and inspired by different events.

All of these deaths point to the relevance of grief eradicated by the posthumanist and transhumanist movements. Braidotti refrains from discussing cases of involuntary and voluntary deaths as well as those of innocent victims, in favour of pursuing a much more enthusiastic view of death as a new beginning. However, she briefly alludes to suicide as an affirmation of life. This differs from Rogowska-Stangret, who persists in her view that death should forever be "insoluble" (46). The Convergence in *Zero K* illustrates these conflicting views, as it approaches death from a dual perspective. On the one hand, the Institute diminishes the relevance of death by displaying soundless images of dying people and natural disasters on the screens that seem alien in the context of the place. On the other hand, the Convergence juxtaposes the brutality of death on the outside with the peace of what the facility offers. The contrast can be read as a way of drawing attention to the exclusivity and comfort of the Institute that also shifts the focus away from the fearful imagery of the place itself: dead bodies in the pods and mannequins. It can be viewed as a distraction from the overwhelming omnipresence of death in the tomblike Institute. By maintaining people's bodies in pods, the Convergence allows its patients to exist in the state of undeath. In this way, the place becomes a transitional stage between life and death: "Away from the surface aspiration and desire for immortality, the Convergence makes a compelling case for avoiding life through cryonics" (Maffey and Teo 17–18). Yet, by contrasting cryonics with the deaths in the videos, the Convergence obliterates the relevance of those deaths.

The "harm" associated with the people dying on the screens is never addressed. Braidotti asserts that "joyful affirmation and becoming" can be only achieved through the rejection of grief ("The Ethics" 153). However,

it is through the act of witnessing Stak's death and accepting grief that Jeff can experience this "restorative capacity" of the act of mourning and thus "become." Rogowska-Stangret insists on the position that "maintaining the simultaneity of life and death is essential," while doing otherwise "makes it impossible to address the harm, and thus ethics loses its restorative capacity" (46). The "deaths" in the novel lead Jeff to a reaffirmation of his own life, or, in François Jullien's words, "de-coincidence": a reopening of new possibilities (qtd. in Jacomino).

The final scene is among the most pivotal, as it ties together multiple themes from the novel in one transcendental moment. In the scene, Jeff becomes a spectator of Manhattanhenge, "a phenomenon during which the rising sun or the setting sun is aligned with the east-west streets of Manhattan's grid of main streets" (Collins Dictionary). The name alludes to Stonehenge and was coined by Neil deGrasse Tyson (Dictionary.com). However, Jeff does not use the term while experiencing the moment. On the one hand, DeLillo's deliberate decision to omit this particular term in favour of describing the scene illustrates the fundamental connection between the environmental elements—sunrays, and the man-made urban architecture, but also historical ones, linking Stonehenge with Manhattanhenge. On the other hand, the act of naming everything is characteristic of the protagonist, as Barbara Pawlak points out: "The fact that the name eludes the language-obsessed Jeffrey is telling, suggestive of his new-found openness that stretches beyond the linguistic" (72). Jeff's experience in the Convergence proves to be transformative in that it frees him from the restraints of the language that he has desperately used as a coping mechanism. The scream of a neurodivergent boy accompanies the protagonist in the scene and marks yet another departure from the vernacular: "In contrast to the lives serving as art in the Convergence, Jeff's art serves life, as he pays more than scant attention to silence and stillness, the everyday moment and fleeting gesture, the 'pre-linguistic grunts' and 'cries of wonder' (274), the sacredness of ordinary language and extraordinary sights" (Barrett 122). Wolf views the boy's earnest reaction of delight as a counterpoint to the preconceptions of society and the Institute: "[I]t is the boy who proves the 'Convergence' transhumanist wrong" (164).

Although the boy's cry is incomprehensible, it is audible and embodied, whereas Artis's interior monologue remains silent, and she is deprived of the sensory experience of the outside world. Rogowska-Stangret importantly points out that "[t]he autistic perception—which is worth mentioning—is not a homogenous phenomenon, it can be a way to capture the specificity of being *of* the world, and reflection—a way to re/solve the world and problematise the harmful opposition between 'normal' and 'pathological' behaviour" (92). In *Zero K*, it is the boy's cries that are chosen to show the superiority of human experience over intellectual abilities. The boy is

accompanied by his mother, and together they become an allusion to Jeff's childhood with his mother, Madeline, and her attention to even the most mundane and irrelevant details. Jeff can be seen as the only character for whom the *potentia* of life and the acknowledgement of grief are not mutually exclusive. It is through the memory of his mother and Stak that Jeff can be seen as a character who embodies Rogowska-Stangret's ethical stance. The insistence on remembering, combined with an experience of becoming a witness to everyone's death, shapes him as a human being. The protagonist does not avert his eyes from the view of death; he acknowledges it, yet he is far from embracing it in a posthumanist way as Braidotti does. Instead, by witnessing the deaths of the people who were closest to him, he becomes even more aware and engaged in his own life. This proves that the affirmation of *potentia* can be even stronger if informed by the memory of those lost.

Zero K's cryonics project reveals the limitations of transhumanist thought, such as the promised inclusivity, connectivity, and control over one's death. However, it is by experiencing both realities, of living "outside" and "inside" the transhumanist Convergence, that Jeff comes to embody Deborah Rose's claim that "[l]ife's desire for its own becoming is actualised through interaction with other living and nonliving matter" (69). In the final scene, Jeff makes a conscious decision to view the boy's shouting as "cries of wonder"; this becomes a powerful metaphor for Jeff's making an effort to, in a Thoreauvian manner, "live deliberately" and reinstitute himself in the present moment despite the shadows of loss.

Works Cited

Ashman, Nathan. "'Death Itself Shall Be Deathless': Transrationalism and Eternal Death in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 60, no. 3, May 2019, pp. 300–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2018.1553845

Barad, Karen. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, pp. 801–31. https://doi.org/10.1086/345321

Barrett, Laura. "'[R]Adiance in Dailiness': The Uncanny Ordinary in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2018, pp. 106–23. https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.42.1.08

Bender, Stephanie. "Biopolitics of the Future: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2006) and Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016)." *Ethics for the Future: Perspectives from 21st Century Fiction*, by Stephanie Bender, Transcript Verlag, 2023, pp. 169–207. https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839468203-007

Bostrom, Nick, et al. "The Transhumanist Declaration." *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, edited by Max More and Natasha Vita-More, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 54–55. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118555927.ch4

Boxall, Peter. *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2006. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203315422

Braidotti, Rosi. "The Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible." *Deleuze and Philosophy*, edited by Constantin Boundas, Edinburgh UP, 2006, pp. 133–59. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748627196-012

Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman.* Polity, 2013.

Cofer, Erik. "Owning the End of the World: *Zero K* and DeLillo's Post-Postmodern Mutation." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 59, no. 4, Aug. 2018, pp. 459–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1412936

Collins Dictionary. "Manhattanhenge Definition and Meaning." *Collins Dictionary*, www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/manhattanhenge, accessed 14 Feb. 2025.

DeLillo, Don. "Interview: The Edge of the Future: A Discussion with Don DeLillo." Interview by Peter Boxall. *Don DeLillo: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Katherine Da Cunha Lewin and Kiron Ward, Bloomsbury, 2019, pp. 159–64.

DeLillo, Don. *Zero K.* Pan Macmillan, 2017.

Dictionary.Com. "Manhattanhenge." *Dictionary.Com*, 14 Apr. 2023, https://www.dictionary.com/e/historical-current-events/manhattanhenge/, accessed 14 Feb. 2025.

Dini, Rachele. "Don DeLillo, *Zero K*." *European Journal of American Studies*, May 2016, pp. 1–4. https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.11393

Enteghar, Kahina, and Amar Guendouzi. "A Heideggerian Reading of the Posthuman Treatment of Death in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 62, no. 1, Jan. 2021, pp. 44–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1772190

Frodeman, Robert. *Transhumanism, Nature, and the Ends of Science*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2019. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429199363

Front, Sonia. "Heads in the Fridge and Minds in New Bodies—Transfers of Consciousness in Hanif Kureishi's *the Body*, Marcel Theroux's *Strange Bodies* and Don DeLillo's *Zero K*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 61, no. 4, Aug. 2020, pp. 487–501. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1749549

Furjanić, Lovro. "The Spectre of Death in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*." *Anafora*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 493–512. https://doi.org/10.29162/ANAFORA.v6i2.10

Glavanakova, Alexandra K. "The Age of Humans Meets Posthumanism: Reflections on Don DeLillo's *Zero K*." *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2017, pp. 91–109. https://doi.org/10.1353/sli.2017.0007

Hall, Melinda Gann. *The Bioethics of Enhancement: Transhumanism, Disability, and Biopolitics*. Lexington, 2017.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. U of Chicago P, 2010.

Herbrechter, Stefan. "Posthuman/ist Literature? Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and *Zero K*." *Open Library of Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1–25. https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.592

Jacomino, Baptiste. "Rouvrir Des Possibles. François Jullien. Paris, Editions de L'Observatoire, 2022 [Reopening possibilities]." *Le philosophoire*, vol. 1, no. 59, 2023, p. 117–20. *Cairn.Info*, https://shs.cairn.info/journal-le-philosophoire-2023-1-page-117?lang=en, accessed 1 Feb. 2025.

Laguarta-Bueno, Carmen. "Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016). Transhumanism, Trauma, and the Ethics of Premature Cryopreservation." *Representing (Post)Human Enhancement Technologies in Twenty-First Century US Fiction*, by Carmen Laguarta-Bueno, Routledge, 2022, pp. 120–67. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003276401-4

Maffey, Ross, and Yugin Teo. "Changing Channels of Technology: Disaster and (Im)mortality in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, *Cosmopolis* and *Zero K*." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, pp. 1–23. https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.74

More, Max. "The Philosophy of Transhumanism." *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, edited by Max More and Natasha Vita-More, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118555927.ch1

Nel, Adéle. "'Why not follow our words bodily into the future tense?': Life, Death and Posthuman Bodies in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*." *Literator*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1–10. https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v42i1.1748

Ng, Lay Sion. "Transhumanism and the Biological Body in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*: A Material Feminist Perspective." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 28, no. 2, Summer 2021, pp. 686–708. https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa114

Pawlak, Barbara. "The Return of the Sublime and the Transcendental in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*." *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature*, vol. 10, Dec. 2022, pp. 65–74. https://doi.org/10.25167/EXP13.22.10.6

Rogowska-Stangret, Monika. *Być ze świata*. Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2021.

Rose, Deborah. "What If the Angel of History Were a Dog?" *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2006, pp. 67–78. https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v12i1.3414

Sheehan, Paul. "Don DeLillo's Cinematic Imaginary: From *A(mericana)* to *Z(ero K)*." *Textual Practice*, vol. 35, no. 10, 2021, pp. 1685–1705. https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1965296

Sougri, Laila. *Representations of Technoculture in Don DeLillo's Novels*. Routledge, 2023. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003407768

Vågnes, Øyvind. "What Does It Mean to Be Human? Speculative Ekphrasis and Anthropocene Trauma in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*." *Terrorizing Images: Trauma and Ekphrasis in Contemporary Literature*, edited by Charles Ivan Armstrong and Unni Langas, De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 29–46. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110693959-003

Wolf, Philipp. *Death, Time and Mortality in the Later Novels of Don DeLillo*. Routledge, 2022. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003289937

Agnieszka Jagła is a PhD student in the field of literature at the Department of British Literature and Culture at the University of Lodz. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on the concept of transhumanism in selected examples of 21st-century fiction.
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4438-5865
agnieszka.jagla@edu.uni.lodz.pl