**“CATASTROPHE IS OUR BEDTIME STORY”:
THE MEDIA-FUELLED OBSESSION WITH DEATH IN DON DELILLO’S *ZERO K***

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Abstract: *Death and the mass-media represent two recurring and connected presences throughout Don DeLillo’s fiction. While his canonical novel White Noise is themed around the paradoxical link between the pathological fear of dying and consumerism, his latest novel Zero K is about the deferral of death through cryonics. Using the analytical tools of critical theory, the current paper aims to analyse how the portrayal of death appears in the media saturated and consumer-driven environment in which DeLillo’s characters evolve, and how technology contributes both to fuelling the obsession with dying and to feeding the illusion of immortality.*

Keywords: *consumerism, death, Don DeLillo, media saturation*

1. Introduction

Often described as “one of the major American novelists now at work” (Bloom 2003:1), praised for his capacity to reproduce the current obsessions of American society, DeLillo offers in his novels uncanny insights into how technology and the omnipresence of media affect everyday life. Throughout many of his works, televised media frequently represents a background voice or a recurring presence, airing news about violent catastrophes, fuelling the characters’ alienation and obsession with death. The paradoxically central position of death inside consumer society and its persistence in the news and in popular culture represents another theme found throughout DeLillo’s entire oeuvre, intrinsically linked with the omnipresence of media. For example, in *White Noise* the main characters suffer from a pathological fear of dying, nurtured by ever-present news reports on catastrophes, *Libra* reconstructs the context in which the iconic death of President Kennedy took place, and *Falling Man* deals with the collective tragedy of the 9/11 attacks and how its survivors need to deal with its aftermath. DeLillo’s latest novel, *Zero K*, is equally centred around the media-fuelled obsession with death in contemporary society, and in what follows I will analyse its connection to the wider consumerist context and fear-permeated environment in which DeLillo’s characters evolve. In my exploration of the novel I use the critical lens provided by postmodern thinkers such as Fredric Jameson, Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Baudrillard, coupled with insights into the “culture of fear” offered by sociologist Frank Furedi.

2. Death, Consumerism and the Narrative Of Fear

The demise of “grand narratives”, providing single, objective and indestructible truths, is one of the defining features of postmodern society, observed Jean-François Lyotard in his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition* (1998). Comprehensive theories about history or science are replaced in postmodern times by “micro-narratives” which constantly undermine the idea of a “universal truth”, providing a plurality of voices and perspectives in the rendering of reality, constructing a discourse marked by diversity and polyphony. DeLillo’s own alternative to the

unchallengeable rational truths of Enlightenment is mirrored throughout many of his novels as being the spectacular violence of news media discourse. “The new tragic narrative” of our times consists of eye-catching fragments of dramatic events, vignettes frequently taken out of context and meant to catch attention for a limited amount of time. Such snippets of reality often involve “midair explosions and crumbled buildings”, as Bill Gray from *Mao II* observes (DeLillo 1991:7), or bring about a flood of useless yet irresistible information, maintaining users “on the puppet drug of personal technology”: “Every touch of a button brings the neural rush of finding something I never knew and never needed to know until it appears at my anxious fingertips, where it remains for a shaky second before disappearing forever”, says Jeffrey Lockhart in *Zero K* (DeLillo 2016:55). The common denominator of news media items dashing their titles on TV or gadget screens throughout DeLillo’s novels is the construction of a diffused threat and the nurturing of an inherent fear. Shocking images from catastrophic events, frightening renderings of senseless violence, often under the umbrella of “terrorism”, reinforce the audiences’ feeling of being powerless, and function as the overwhelming plot defining (post-)postmodern existence, in which “the darker the news, the grander the narrative” (DeLillo 1991:18).

The fact that Don DeLillo’s writing contains the defining features of postmodernism has gone more or less undisputed in connection to the early and mid-part of his oeuvre. John Duvall described *White Noise*, first published in 1985, as a “meditation on postmodernity” and David Leigh as a “postmodern apocalyptic parable” (quoted in Cofer 2018). *Zero K*, however, DeLillo’s latest novel up to date, has been described as containing the traits of a cultural mind-set that transcends postmodernism. Erik Cofer describes the novel as involving “post-postmodern mutations”, displaying a posthumanist approach that indicates a departure from what is regarded as the “traditional” themes associated with postmodernism: “DeLillo’s anti-transhumanist deliberation provides the blueprint for a post-postmodern ethics in contradistinction to the postmodern melancholia of his earlier work” (2018). The shift, however, does not represent a complete break with the past, but rather a “mutation”, a change occurring naturally over time. While characters Ross and Artis from *Zero K* can be seen as an “older and wealthier version of Jack and Babette” from *White Noise*, DeLillo marks a perceptible shift in his approach to the media-fuelled obsession with death. In his 1985 novel, the author describes the “paralysing dread” of dying, whereas his 2016 novel is themed around a strategy for deferring death through cryonics (Cofer 2018).

In both novels, consumerism and death represent the key-words defining the lives of characters, coupled with the omnipresence of mass-media. The connection between the incessant drive to consume and the pathological fear of dying has been under the attention of several critical thinkers, often described as a mark of contemporary society. In his influential work analysing postmodernism or “the cultural logic of late capitalism”, Fredric James observes how commodity production became a dominant frame for all areas of human life. “The frantic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover” (1991:4) transcends from a societal level to a personal one. Commodification becomes all-encompassing, affecting not just consumer goods, but also people and relationships. Jack Gladney from *White Noise* and Ross Lockhart from *Zero K* can be seen as embodiments of the consumer-driven mind-set. The former represents the parental figure in a family with four children – each being the result of a different marriage and thus standing as evidence for the “commodification” of domestic relations, allowing for their consumption at a rate resembling the unremitting appetite that characterizes supermarket shopping. Moreover, Gladney is a professor of “Hitler studies”, a fictional academic field brought ironically by DeLillo into discussion to reflect on the commodification of higher education. Ross Lockhart, on the other hand, made his fortune by speculating on death as a commercial indicator – “he’d made an early reputation by analysing the profit impact of natural disasters” (DeLillo 2016:14) – and

symbolically regards the deferral of Artis' death as an addition to the list of his consumer privileges.

The portrayal of both Jack and Ross echoes what Gilles Lipovetsky described as "homo consumericus": they are no longer concerned only with owning a wide range of material goods, but also seeking psychological well-being, emotional balance and self-fulfilment – all of which find their answer in a personal blend of spiritual beliefs and rituals (2007). The materialistic craving which was typical to the early consumer society becomes outdated, replaced by an expansion of the "market of the soul", by the cultivation of inner balance, harmony and self-esteem, which is coupled with the proliferation of what Lipovetsky calls "the drugstores of happiness". This would be where the hyperconsumer searches for ready-made solutions for his hedonistic desires, effortless and always-available triggers of happiness. The effect, however, proves at best to be temporary, as Lipovetsky concludes and DeLillo's characters seem to mirror in his novels. Hyperconsumerism marks the coexistence of abundance and search for well-being with that of fear, insecurity and angst, which is why Lipovetsky characterizes contemporary society as one "paradoxical happiness", where the search for quick and ready-made solutions for inner turmoil attracts the opposite outcome. The "medicalization" of consumption is a key feature of hyperconsumerism, cultivating the severe obsession with one's health and hypochondria. In this context, argues the French philosopher, it is no longer enough to buy medicines when the symptoms of a disease appear. The hyperconsumer feels it is his duty to read articles and watch TV shows on health issues, browse through web pages and medical encyclopaedias, preventing and deterring the course of any disease, constantly evaluating risks and anticipating the future (Lipovetsky 2007: 252-253).

The facility managing cryonics in *Zero K*, entitled "The Convergence" and placed in a mysterious desert location near Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, is a state-of-the-art hyperconsumerist artefact. It is addressed solely to those with high socioeconomic standards of life, alluring them with the "life everlasting" promise, that in the past used to be reserved solely to a minority of world leaders: "Life everlasting belongs to those of breathtaking wealth. Kings, queens, emperors, pharaohs. It's no longer a teasing whisper you hear in your sleep. This is real. [...] Rewrite the sad grim grieving playscript of death in the usual manner." (DeLillo 2016:76) Life ever after is presented here as a selling proposition based on a philosophy including a mixture of religious influences. "Faith-based technology", offering "another god", who is "real", "true" and "it delivers", says Artis, an in-patient at the facility, waiting to undergo cryogenation. The promise of "delivery" through science, which represents "superior services" when compared to other religions, is typical for the commercially-oriented mind of the consumer. This statement continues and reinforces the idea that appears in the very first line of the book: "Everybody wants to own the end of the world". Gaining ownership over death represents the ultimate desire for the hyperconsumerist mind-set, as described by Lipovetsky. The end in itself thus becomes commodified, available at the push of a button or delayed for whenever its owner wants.

Death's intrinsic link to consumerism has also been a topic of interest for French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. The perpetual drive for renewing commodities – the term including all areas of life, from consumer goods to cultural expression or family relations – has at its core a constant pressure for replacement, for throwing things away, argues Baudrillard (1998). Condemned to an ephemeral life, all commodities have "wastage built into them" and are not produced for their "use-value or possibility, but with an eye to their death" (1998: 47). Thus, death gains its central position inside consumer culture. The subsequent necrophobia and search for drugs to alleviate it, experienced by DeLillo's characters in *White Noise*, can be seen as the inevitable outcome of the "perpetual suicide" of everything around them – failed marriages, expired consumer products, environmental disasters and other collective catastrophes included. Moreover, the obsession with death is strongly linked with the "culture of fear" maintained primarily by the mass-media (Furedi 2018).

Advertising promises a hyperbolic array of benefits following the purchase of consumer goods, a complete satisfaction of the consumer. This, however, remains more than often unachieved in reality, making room for perpetual frustration. One of the characters in DeLillo's debut novel *Americana* observes at one point: "To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream." But dreams promised by advertising are often nothing more than attractively-packaged lies. The promise of perfection that doesn't meet reality brings about a set of unavoidable consequences. Exposed on a regular basis to a flood of messages focusing on satisfaction and on an "ever positive finality," the consumer is forced to repress "the whole of the negativity of desire, [...] all the things which do not fit into this positive vision", and what results is "a gigantic fund of anxiety", of seemingly unexplained gloominess and depression, argues Baudrillard (1998:177). In the context of *White Noise* and *Zero K*, this view can serve as an explanation for the inflation of anxiety and fear of dying.

One of media's predominant roles is the creation of what Baudrillard critically calls a "system of needs", a set of artificially generated necessities whose realization promises contentment, but in fact does not deliver it, functioning simply as a substitute for participation in society (1998:75). The televised media's power to shape decisively its audiences' perception about reality was a subject of interest for Theodore Adorno as well. In his view, the outcome of intensive exposure to television is that "empirical life becomes infused with a kind of meaning that virtually excludes adequate experience" (Adorno 1991:169) influencing viewers' through the use of stereotypes that apply not just to on-screen narratives but to life outside it as well.

Media's power to shape what audiences think represented a major interest for several researchers in the field of communication and audience studies. Among them is George Gerbner (1980) who founded the "cultivation theory", studying the long-term effects of exposure to televised media. The more time audiences spend in front of a TV screen the more likely they are to confuse televised reality with the real-life one, he found. And since death has a symbolic function in prime time media – granting a high degree of newsworthiness, according to journalistic standards – the obsession with it in a media-dominated society comes as a natural result.

News media is responsible with selecting and granting meaning to an otherwise endless stream of daily events and in this narrative frame death has a constantly prominent role. As Gerbner's research shows, death in prime-time media is associated with a "fatal flaw or ineptitude, a punishment for sins or mark of a tragedy", perpetually restating "the risks of life" and cultivating "insecurity, anxiety, fear of the 'mean world' out there, and dependence on some strong protector" (1980:66). Homicides and genocides, terrorist attacks and natural catastrophes resulting in massive loss of life are all part of the symbolically central place of death in prime time media, mainly functioning as a "ritualistic demonstration of power", concludes Gerbner.

The TV appears as a constant presence in *White Noise*, a background voice who often intermingles with dialogues taking place in the Gladney home. Read from the perspective of Gerbner's cultivation theory, *White Noise* represents a faithful rendering of the strong effects generated by long-term exposure to televised media. Jack and Babette's paralysing dread of dying, and the frantic search for a drug that would alleviate it, can be explained through this filter. "I'm terribly afraid. I'm afraid all the time. [...] I've been afraid for more than half my life. [...] I wake up sweating. I break out in killer sweats", says Babette (DeLillo 1986: 89). In *Zero K*, fear functions as a latent yet dominant feeling. It is less expressed by characters, but it is responsible for prompting them to try to suspend the implacable power of death. "There's a connection between the advances that are made in technology and the sense of primitive fear people develop in response to it", said DeLillo in an interview with Vince Passaro (1991). The assertion can literally be applied to his work. While in *White Noise* the TV screen represents a voice usually coming from the corner of the room, small yet persistent, in *Zero K* the screen shows catastrophic events involving people filmed at life-sized scale. It has a mesmerizing and engulfing power,

overwhelming Jeffrey Lockhart with its tragedies, permanently reinforcing his latent fear and powerlessness.

At the end of the hall there was a screen jutting from a niche in the ceiling. It began to lower, stretching wall to wall and reaching nearly the floor. I approached slowly. At first the images were all water. 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, other 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 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. (DeLillo 2016:11)

Jeffrey Lockhart, the main character from *Zero K*, watches a series of similar screenings throughout the novel. Each comes unexpected, on a screen appearing in front of him on one of the hallways of The Convergence, and attracts him inside a catastrophe filmed in real time, featuring life-sized characters. Whether it is a tornado, a self-immolating man, or an enormous fire catching entire forests and hills, the televised catastrophe contains a raw display of dead and dying people, with the camera lingering painfully on the bodies. The effect is magnetic: “The detail-work of their violent end was hard to watch. But I watched, feeling obligated to something or someone, the victims perhaps, and thinking of myself as lone witness, sworn to the task” (DeLillo 2016:36). On the one hand, the experience seems to be masochistic, keeping Jeff glued to the screen despite the unbearable violence of the images. On the other, the viewing gains a cathartic role, temporarily alleviating fear; it distracts the individual from the thought of his own imminent death. “Catastrophe is our bedtime story”, says one of the speakers at a ritualistic meeting meant to theorize the spiritual motives and object of the quasi-mystical institution managing the process of cryonics. “It’s an escape from our personal mortality. [...] It overwhelms what is weak and fearful in our bodies and minds. We face the end but not alone. We lose ourselves in the core of the storm”, he adds (DeLillo 2016:66). In the same way that Dylar alleviates Babette’s fear of dying in *White Noise*, the promise of death’s deferral through cryonics functions for Artis as a comforting mechanism against necrophobia.

The pathological fear of death is symptomatic for a larger phenomenon attesting the existence of a narrative of fear in contemporary society, reinforced by omnipresent risk warnings and diffused threats lingering everywhere around us. The prevalence of fear has been a topic of interest for several sociologists starting with the late 1990s. In his books on the subject, Frank Furedi argues that the narrative of fear gained enormous ground in recent decades as a result of the artificial inflation of the concept of harm, unsupported by an objective increase in the actual dangers people face. In addition, dominant fear is associated with promoting safety as fundamental value in society, coupled with a general distrust of the individuals’ capacity to deal with adversity. Unsurprisingly, the advent of a “culture of fear” has been linked to the mass-media’s predilection for disseminating alarmist and dramatic information. As a dominant idea in shaping the content of news items, “the narrative of fear attempts to offer a system of meaning; a background, context and set of assumptions that guide people in the way they go about making sense of, and responding to, threats”, argues Furedi in his latest book (2018:10).

As Adorno observed a few decades ago, media continues to reassert its ever-growing power to shape the mentalities of its viewers by replacing direct experience. It comes then as a natural result that “the fears highlighted in contemporary society are far less based on direct experience than in previous time” and one of media’s central roles is to provide “a constantly evolving script about how [audiences] should experience and react to global threats”, thus continually cultivating “a landscape of fear” (Furedi 2018: 16). This is done not just through the selection of dramatic events, but also through language. The use of words such as “extinction”,

“pandemic”, “epidemic” or “risk” in the mass-media has grown significantly from the late 1990s to the late 2000s, shows Furedi, as well the ease with which labels such as “extreme weather” are granted to certain situations, artificially alarming and providing an inflated sense of danger (2018).

The socially dominant atmosphere of fear is reinforced through the intentional creation of a state of emergency which becomes permanent, thus functioning as a routine practice for many contemporary states, including those known as established democracies, argues Giorgio Agamben (2005). Similarly to how the media inflates the importance of banal events by granting alarmist, shocking headlines to events that are in fact rather ordinary, atypical and provisional measures such as declaring “a state of exception” increasingly tend to become “the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics” (Agamben 2005:2). Reasons for fear are thus constantly reiterated and used as motives for undemocratic practices, says the Italian critic, including civil right limitations, excessive surveillance etc.

The idea that media is responsible for ritualistically cultivating the idea that there is a constant war going on appears in the subtext of several dialogues in *Zero K*, functioning as a fundamental philosophical argument behind the existence of The Convergence and the motivation of cryonics as an alternative to dying: “Terror and war, everywhere now, sweeping the face of our planet. [...] These events have become insistent clusters that touch and spread and bring us all into range of a monodrama far larger, world-wide, than ever before” (DeLillo 2016: 241-242). A similar idea appears in the essay published by Jean Baudrillard in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, where he brings about the idea of death’s prevalence in the media. But not as far-away event that the viewer can feel detached from: “Here, then, it is all about death, not only about the violent irruption of death in real time – ‘live’ so to speak – but the irruption of death which is far more than real: a death which is symbolic and sacrificial – that is to say, the absolute, irrevocable event” (Baudrillard 2002:17).

Terrorism and the threat of violent catastrophes appear as “selling propositions” offered by members of The Convergence in several episodes of *Zero K*, justifying the need for cryonics as a wilful and temporary suspension of life. Using the advances of technology as a dominant mantra, they feed the illusion of immortality not just in the minds of terminally-ill patients, such as Artis, but also tackle the consumerist ego of Ross, who considers going through cryonics although his health is not in decline.

3. Conclusion

Don DeLillo’s novels have long been concerned with the omnipresence of media in contemporary society, and its link with consumerism and death. In the current paper I analysed the presence of these themes in his latest novel *Zero K*, making frequent references to *White Noise*, his canonical novel, with which it has several marked connections. Read from the point of view of postmodern critics such as Fredric Jameson, Gilles Lipovetsky or Jean Baudrillard, DeLillo’s latest novel up to date makes a symbolic statement about the intensification of the process of commodification, to the point where it engulfs concepts such as religion and death. *Zero K* thus marks a shift away from *White Noise* in terms of portraying death in consumer society, moving towards the idea that immortality can be “owned”.

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