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# Seize the Empty Present : The Poetics of “Twittering” in Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*

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Don DeLillo’s 2001 novella *The Body Artist* is one of the most distinctive works among his oeuvre. Unlike his previous works, as Phillip Nel asserts, *The Body Artist* seems to address “little explicit examination of the effects of social, political, or cultural changes ; no Kennedy assassination, no cold war, no nuclear waste, no suspicious corporations” (736). Instead of such public affairs in American history, the novella focuses on the personal life of Lauren Hartke, the protagonist and titular body artist ; while pursuing an abstract, philosophical taste, the novella takes the readers to an adventure of exploring a relationship between time and human existence. Why did DeLillo empty the political and historical content from his first work in the twenty-first century? In fact, to answer this question will paradoxically expose the political and historical nature of the novella. Yet before hastening to the answer, we have to begin by deliberately examining how DeLillo represents “time” in *The Body Artist*.

Peter Boxall insists that *The Body Artist* “take[s] place in the time of mourning, in a kind of evacuated time which has lost its narrative quality” (*Possibility* 216), for Lauren loses her husband Rey Robles from suicide at the outset of the story. For Lauren, “it is time that defines your existence” (*BA* 98), and “[t]ime is the only narrative that matters. It . . . makes it possible for us to . . . see death happen and come out of it” (*BA* 98-99). In order to overcome Rey’s death, Lauren therefore begins to lead her life by making plans and “organiz[ing] time until she [can] live again” (*BA* 36).

Lauren has long believed that “narrative quality” exists in the consecutive flow of time from the past to the present, and then to future. After Rey’s suicide, however, she encounters an autistic and aphasic man named Mr. Tuttle, who “lives in a kind of time that ha[s] no narrative quality” (*BA* 68); he cannot perceive the passage of time, has no sense of the present, and lives in a mental world where past and future are entangled. In this chaotic sense of time, Tuttle “drifts from one reality to another, independent of the logic of time” (*BA* 98).

Moreover, due to his autism and aphasia, Tuttle’s speech is repetitive and often devoid of context, which makes it difficult for Lauren to establish communication with him. Nevertheless, from Lauren’s perspective, Tuttle’s voice sounds like the “twittering” of birds that frequently appear in the background of the story. In respect of a free play of voices without meanings, Tuttle’s twittering has a close connection with “infantile babbling,” which DeLillo has been persistently fascinated with.<sup>1</sup> If the babbling makes it possible to “bridge between one world and the next” (Cowart, *Physics* 205), so Tuttle’s twittering undoubtedly ushers Lauren from one reality into another.

Based on the conception of “twittering,” this essay will explore how Lauren crosses the threshold from “time that has narrative quality” into “time that has no narrative quality” by employing Tuttle’s enigmatic words as a pilot. Gill Deleuze’s theory of time and “becoming” is also included to guide readers in understanding Tuttle’s singular perception of time, while the next sections discuss how Lauren incorporates his sense of time into her body art named *Body Time*. Following this discussion, and in opposition to Nel’s observation that *The Body Artist* is less connected to the political and historical context, this essay will further investigate the political and historical aspect of this novella in the context of the twenty-first century. Although Anne Longmuir has already demonstrated the political nature of the novella from the perspective of “body,”<sup>2</sup> this essay will reconsider such nature from that of “time” by linking Deleuze’s theory to Boxall’s contestation via a key-

word “emptiness.”

### 1. The Herald of the Time Stranger : Animal Time, Web Time

Tuttle does not appear in the storyline until the third chapter of the book, yet the birds have already appeared in the first chapter and indicated his secret dwelling in the attic of Lauren’s house. The first chapter depicts the last morning Lauren and Rey spend in the kitchen, where the window is equipped with a feeder that gathers wild birds. When a blue jay lands on the feeder, Lauren and the jay stare at each other for a while. According to Mark Osteen, the blue jay, called a “skilled mimic” (*BA* 20), “figures Lauren and prefigures Mr. Tuttle, each of whom habitually appropriates others’ words and actions” (“Echo” 67).

In gazing at the jay, Lauren imagines what kind of world birds are seeing, and comes to a conclusion that they are seeing “the apparition of a space set off from time” (*BA* 20). Comparing Lauren’s gaze at the jay with Ishmael’s one at the white whale in *Moby Dick* (1851), Boxall astutely contends :

‘Time began with man’, Ishmael thinks to himself in a Ricoeurish way ; but the consciousness of the whale seems to him to stretch much further, to extend in a dimension that knows nothing of human time. Ishmael is entranced, confounded by the contemplation of this *animal time*, the time of the ‘un-sourced existence’ of the whale, which, ‘having been before all time, must needs exist after all human ages are over’ (p.408). When Lauren looks into the eye of the bird, it is this kind of extended time that she feels. . . . (*Value* 114-15, emphasis added)

In the eyes of the jay Lauren senses this kind of macro time that is far beyond human knowledge and cognition. She later finds this “unmeasurable” time in Tuttle,

for he is a twittering-birdlike existence, the one who “violates the limits of human” (*BA* 108).

While entranced by the “primitiveness” of the animal time, by contrast, it is in the time of “cyberspace” (developed technology) that Lauren seeks solace for her grief over Rey’s death ; she finds comfort in spending “hours at the computer screen looking at a live-streaming video feed from the edge of a two-lane road in a city [Kotka] in Finland,” and the video feed amuses her “because it [is] happening now” (*BA* 37). This “real-time” connection beyond the long distance between America and Finland seems to allow Lauren to resurrect her sense of “the present” that she has lost due to Rey’s death.

“The present” as shown through the live video feed, however, is the opposite of the “organized time” that Lauren seeks in mourning for her husband. Although nothing is happening on the road in Kotka, except for a few cars entering and leaving, Lauren “set[s] aside time every day for the webcam at Kotka. . . . It [is] best in the dead times. It emptie[s] her mind . . .” (*BA* 37-38). Rather than the organized time, the live video feed of Kotka is a metaphorical icon of the “dead time”—or “the empty present”—which defies any organization of time. In this light, Lauren has shown contradiction in her desire : she wants to strive in seizing the present and restore her mind by organizing time, yet she also longs to empty her mind by feasting upon the dead time on the deserted road in Kotka. Lauren’s desire for the empty present, in fact, later becomes an important factor that helps her forge an affinity with Tuttle.

## 2. The Empty Present : Toward Two Directions at Once

Soon after Lauren forms the habit of watching the live video feed from Kotka, she finds a mysterious, naked man in the attic of her house, whose name, age, and origin are all unknown. Hence, this mysterious man is a kind of “unsour-

ced existence” like *Moby Dick*, although Lauren names him Mr. Tuttle for the sake of convenience. In their first contact, Lauren asks Tuttle, “Tell me. You’ve been here how long?” (*BA* 43), but an answer is out of the question because he cannot “imagine time existing in reassuring sequence” (*BA* 81). Moreover, while experiencing “another kind of reality where he is here and there, before and after,” Tuttle does not know “how to measure himself to what we call the Now” (*BA* 68, 70). As Joseph Dewey puts it, Tuttle “is time without a narrative, a fluid construction without a fixed identity, a presence without a clear definition, time without a measured present” (135).

Deleuze’s theory of time can be effective in further investigating Tuttle’s chaotic sense of time that holds no fixed point for the present but the simultaneous occurrence of past and future. Deleuze claims that the past, present, and future “are not three successive dimensions, but two simultaneous readings of time” (5) : “Chronos” and “Aion.” Chronos is the present in a general sense that “fills time, whereas past and future are two dimensions relative to the present in time” (Deleuze 162). Since Chronos is inextricable from “corporeal qualities” (Deleuze 165), it can be measured or organized. That is, Chronos is the time Lauren needs in order to overcome Rey’s death.

Aion, on the other hand, is an “empty” time that is “opposed to the corporeal and measured present” (Deleuze 165) : “Instead of a present which absorbs the past and the future, a future and past divide the present at every instant and subdivide it ad infinitum into past and future, in both directions at once” (Deleuze 164). An understanding of the characteristic of “becoming” would allow readers to understand Deleuze’s concept of Aion :

[A] pure becoming without measure, a veritable becoming-mad, which never rests. It moves in both directions at once. It always eludes the present, causing future and past, more and less, too much and not enough to coincide in

the simultaneity of a rebellious matter. (Deleuze 1-2)

“Becoming” is unable to retain the present since the present always passes away. When we think, “this is now,” the very “this” actually is not now but is already passing into both the past and the future. In this way, the occurrence of the present coincides with dividing it into two directions—past and future—at once. What Deleuze calls Aion is “a pure instant which is endlessly subdivided” (147), “the empty present” (63) which always eludes its presence; hence, it is impossible to measure, organize, experience, or even represent Aion. Accordingly, Aion is essential in fully grasping Tuttle’s perception of time which has no sense of the present but only the simultaneous occurrence of past and future.

In fact, Tuttle’s schizophrenic speech, which provides no signifieds except for the corruption of tenses, unintentionally represents the present of Aion :

Being here has come to me. I am with the moment, I will leave the moment. Chair, table, wall, hall, all for the moment, in the moment. It has come to me. Here and near. From the moment I am gone, am left, am leaving. I will leave the moment from the moment. (BA 78)

The following explanation can be utilized in searching for the definition of his “nonsense” words : firstly, Tuttle is with “the moment”—“here and near”—represented by “corporeal qualities” such as “chair, table, wall, hall”; yet, no sooner does he enter the moment than he “leaves” it; through repeatedly entering and leaving the moments at once, he tears the corporeal present infinitely into both the past and the future, whereby he makes the present “empty.” With this transcendental sense of time, Tuttle’s “words ran on, sensuous and empty” (BA 78).

In effect, this transcendental time phenomenon occurs in the live video feed from Kotka. Imagine that a car passes by on the screen. No sooner does the car

enter the screen than it vanishes from the screen again, and only emptiness is left on the road. David Cowart interprets the video of Kotka in the reading of time as Chronos : “Kotka is the spatial emblem of a traditional view of time in which past and future—the road in, the road out—converge from different directions on the present” (*Physics* 207). When a car is entering and leaving the screen, in contrast, the video feed participates in the representation of the empty present of Aion —Tuttle’s sense of time. This fact justifies Lauren’s fancy that Tuttle has “come from cyberspace,” “from Kotka, in Finland” (*BA* 45). From the above analyses, the fact that Lauren has found solace in watching the “empty time” in Kotka proves that, while tending toward the organized time (Chronos) in her mourning, she is potentially desiring Tuttle’s sense of time (Aion).

### 3. The Refrain of Twittering : The Poetics of Territorial Assemblage

In that the live video feed of Kotka is expressed as “an act of floating poetry” (*BA* 38), it is no exaggeration to say that Tuttle is “an existence of floating poetry” if he is from cyberspace. To Lauren, Tuttle’s enigmatic speech sounds like “song” or “pure chant” (*BA* 78, 79). Full of “the poetic nuance” (Cowart, “Power” 156), Tuttle’s unintelligible words ultimately represent the time as Aion :

He said, “The word for moonlight is moonlight.”

This made her happy. It was logically complex and oddly moving and circularly beautiful and true—or maybe not so circular but straight as straight can be. (*BA* 87)

Indeed, Lauren’s thought that his words are “not so circular but straight as straight can be” highlights the most significant characteristic of Aion :

Always already passed and eternally yet to come, Aion is the eternal truth of time : *pure empty form of time*, which has freed itself of its present corporeal content and has thereby unwound its own circle, stretching itself out in a straight line. (Deleuze 165, emphasis in original)

Made happy by Tuttle's poetic twittering, Lauren desires to "find a name that she can call him to his face" (*BA* 87). Never satisfied, however, is her desire to name and then tame him. Katsuaki Watanabe notes the reversed situation in which Lauren, who at first discovers, names, and appropriates Tuttle as if to imitate an imperialistic subject colonizing the new continent, gradually becomes involved in his sense of time and unexpectedly appropriated by him (359, 364). One of the reasons why Lauren is fascinated by Tuttle is that he can replicate Rey's voice—and what he said in the past—as precisely and repeatedly as "a human tape recorder" (Cowart, *Physics* 203) : "he knew how to make her husband live in the air that rushed from his lungs into his vocal folds—air to sounds, sounds to words, words the man, shaped faithfully on his lips and tongue" (*BA* 65). In this way, "[t]here [is] a peculiarity in his voice, a trait *developing* even as he [speaks]" (*BA* 51, emphasis added), which marks the characteristic of "becoming" in his voice. Besides, Tuttle's voice can become transgendered and transcend the time sequence ; he even copies Lauren's voice and foreknowingly speaks what she will speak in the future (*BA* 86, 90). Thus, Tuttle uses the voice of "becoming that moves in both directions at once in the simultaneity of a rebellious matter" : male and female ; past and future ; the primitiveness of bird-twittering and the developed technology of a tape recorder.

The repetitiveness of Tuttle's twittering functions as an advantage in his dispute over mental territories with Lauren. "The role of the refrain," as Deleuze and Félix Guattari state, "has often been emphasized : it is territorial, a territorial assemblage. Bird songs : the bird sings to mark its territory" (312). Following their

theory of “the refrain,” it is evident that Tuttle is marking his territory by repeatedly twittering. Most importantly, Lauren, who has attempted to colonize Tuttle by naming him, becomes unexpectedly attracted to his twittering and unconsciously captured in his territory. The territorial competition among the birds over the feeder indicates the increasing tension between Lauren and Tuttle :

They [The birds] came flying in straight-up to the rungs, fighting for space at the feeding ports, pecking at others. . . . They flew off and came back. . . not singing exactly but what’s the word, twitter or peep or squeak, and they attacked each other on the rungs or scrambling in midair. . . . (BA 76)

Paul Giaimo interprets the birds “going crazy on the feeder” (BA 71) as “the danger of her [Lauren’s] losing sanity” due to Rey’s passing (165). Osteen, on the other hand, argues that “the novel’s omnipresent birds . . . come to represent Lauren’s shape-lifting subjectivity and quest to shed her old skin” (“Dedalian” 146). Although their analyses of the birds are suggestive to some extent, both of them welcome Lauren’s perspective into consideration but choose to shy away from Tuttle’s. Rather, from my analyses above, it is Lauren and Tuttle’s keen competition for the mental territories that the birds twittering and fighting for the space metaphorically refer to.

As if possessed by Tuttle, Lauren begins using Rey’s voice : “It was his voice, a dry piping sound, hollow-bodied, like a bird humming on her tongue” (BA 108). This seems to suggest Tuttle’s triumph over the territorial dispute with Lauren. However, no sooner does he accomplish his appropriation of Lauren than he disappears before her through the “passage of the Refrain” : “the refrain moves in the direction of the territorial assemblage and lodges itself there or *leaves*” (Deleuze and Guattari 323, emphasis added). Namely, the refrain founds a territory that would allow exterior influence, and disengages itself from staying inside.

Stepping out of the territory allows Tuttle “to bud ‘lines of drift’ with different loops, knots, speeds, movements, gestures, and sonorities” (Deleuze and Guattari, 311-12), by which Tuttle can maintain “becoming.” Inspired by Tuttle as “heteroclitic muse” (Cowart, *Physics* 204), Lauren in turn does not remain in the territory he leaves behind, but opens herself up to a new phase of “becoming.” Furthermore, her “body” becomes a crucial part in representing the empty present of Aion despite its unrepresentability.

#### 4. *Body Time* : A Dance of a Still Life That’s Living

As discussed above, piloted by Tuttle’s twittering, Lauren accomplishes crossing the threshold from “time that has narrative quality” into “time that has no narrative quality.” In the climax, Lauren knits this transcendental time experience into her body performance *Body Time*, in which she transforms her body phantasmagorically and transsexually from “an ancient Japanese woman. . . gesturing in the stylized manner of Noh drama” to “a naked man, emaciated and aphasic” like Tuttle (BA 111). In this way, like Tuttle’s “becoming” voice, Lauren’s body also “moves in both directions at once in the simultaneity of a rebellious matter”: the “stylized manner” of the Japanese “woman” and the “roughness” of the naked “man.”

Besides, Lauren acts out this transgendered body performance in extremely slow motion. The concept of the performance, according to Lauren, “is to think time differently” (BA 113); throughout the performance she “[s]top[s] time, or stretch[es] it out, or open[s] it up,” and thereby becomes “a still life that’s living, not painted” (BA 113). This is the ultimate two-directionality of Lauren’s performance in that she simultaneously achieves “stillness” and “livingness.” Most significantly, when performing, Lauren knows and sees both the past and the future (BA 113). This feature of her performance corresponds exactly to the reading of time

as Aion. Although Aion should be intrinsically unrepresentable since it always eludes its presence, Deleuze is convinced that it can be represented by body performers such as “actor, dancer, or mime” (168) :

The actor belongs to the Aion : instead of the most profound, the most fully present, the present which spreads out and comprehends the future and the past, an unlimited past-future rises up here reflected in an empty present which has no more thickness than the mirror. The actor or actress represents, but what he or she represents is always still in the future and already in the past. . . . (150)

In their one-off performance acted out “here and now,” the body performers pulse out their “now” one after another into both the past and the future at once. As the body performers empty the present in such a way, so Lauren orients her performance toward “emptiness.” She explains her own performance as follows :

“It’s vanity. That’s all it [Lauren’s performance] is,” she says. “But vanity is essential to an actor. It’s an emptiness. This is where the word comes from. And this is what I work toward and build on.” (BA 110)

In this case, Lauren’s definition of the word “vanity” perhaps refers to the “exaggeration of a moment.” As mentioned above, Lauren stretches the moment out as long as possible, opens it up, and almost stops it. Lauren thus exaggerates the moment, but avoids the entire halt of time. If time were stopped entirely, then the moment of “becoming” would no longer exist. In order to prevent the discontinuation of the flux of “becoming,” Lauren keeps her performance alive by slowing it almost to a halt ; that is, by becoming “a still life that’s living,” Lauren attempts to seize the moment of “becoming,” the empty present of Aion. She can

thereby achieve a closer approach to Tuttle's sense of time that "is something like itself, sheer and bare, empty of shelter" (*BA* 99)—or, in Deleuze's term, "*pure empty form of time*" (Deleuze 165, emphasis in original).

Only one who has reached this "eternal truth of time" can expose oneself to deep philosophical introspection. Lauren's friend Mariella Chapman, in her brief review of *Body Time*, comments that her performance "is about who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are" (*BA* 116). Evidently, Mariella's comment underlines that Lauren's *Body Time*, which has sharply brought out the "*pure empty form of time*" by dislocating the usual sense of time, could be a rehearsal that invokes the idea of "what humans are unless time defines human existence."

### Conclusion

As we have seen so far, *The Body Artist* is seemingly portrayed as a philosophical work that ultimately explores the relationship between time and human existence instead of the political and historical themes which have long distinguished DeLillo's writing. Although DeLillo resumes writing about such themes after *Cosmopolis* (2003), the sense of time presented in *The Body Artist* has been, in some form or other, preserved in the following works.

Probably, in response to a new century, DeLillo's writing reached a kind of "singularity" in its representation of time. Boxall relates DeLillo's representation of the metaphysical time to the technological and political context in the twenty-first century : "Time becomes heavier and heavier in his [DeLillo's] work, until it is released into the thin, unbound chronology of a new century, in which narrative itself is uncertain of its co-ordinates, and in which the technological and political forces which govern the passing of time become strange, new and unreadable" (*Twenty-first-century* 29). In contrast, Boxall gives quite an opposite view to *Underworld* (1997), whose narrative covers the long period ranging from the 1950s

to the 1990s :

The Joycean science teacher Albert Bronzini tells his students, in *Underworld*, that ‘we think in decades’. We organise and divide time in this way, he goes on, ‘because we need organizing principles to make us less muddled’ (U 735). But this kind of organising principle . . . is exploded in DeLillo’s two most recent novels [*The Body Artist* and *Cosmopolis*]. (Possibility 215)

In the twentieth century, the “political forces which govern the passing of time” seem still intact. For Albert Bronzini, a character in *Underworld*, the time in the twentieth century may be possible to measure and organize. He can therefore retain his narrative quality and keep his mental health good. In the twenty-first century, conversely, the political forces that govern the passing of time come into malfunction since “the temporality of the new millennium is as yet unframed. . . . We find ourselves, now, on a temporal and spatial ground. . . that is founded on *emptiness*” (Boxall, *Possibility* 216, emphasis added).

Characters in DeLillo’s twenty-first century works underpin the “emptiness” of time and space where any boundaries can be dissolved and become limitless with the technological and political changes—the accelerative development of internet technology and globalization. More specifically, Boxall regards Tuttle, who is from cyberspace, as “a time that has been made available by the historical development of electronic audio-visual and computer technology,” noting that “[t]he capacity of internet technology to link two places in real time, to make such an immediate connection between here and there, speaks for Lauren of the kind of melting of spatial and temporal distinctions” (*Possibility* 221, 222). Tuttle’s cyber-spaced figuration is inherited—and even more incarnated—by the cybercapitalist Eric Packer, the protagonist of *Cosmopolis*, who is always-already connected to any information available in the world via the Internet. On cyberspace where “[t]-

he present is harder to find" (C 79), Eric finds himself "insubstantial" (C 9). This insubstantiality—or emptiness—collapses the political forces to organize and frame time. Consequently, the ongoing time in the twenty-first century is the "empty time" that has lost its narrative quality.

From this perspective, what the future holds in store for Lauren, whom DeLillo invents for his first work in the twenty-first century, is the time and space of the new millennium that seem more chaotic than Rey's death. In a sense, Tuttle has granted Lauren something more than the solace for her grief over Rey's death; through his twittering that generates the transcendental time experience, Tuttle has initiated Lauren into the chaos of the new world. It is due to this initiation that Lauren is ready to accept the chaos in the final scene where she dares to open the window of her "empty" room in order to feel "the flow of time in her body, to tell who she [is]" (BA 132).

Like Lauren, who has emptied the corporeal content from her time in the face of Tuttle's chaotic world, DeLillo also needed to empty the political and historical content from his writing in response to the new century, which paradoxically characterizes the political and historical nature of *The Body Artist*. Evidently, as is the case for Lauren's experience, the process of representing the empty present allows DeLillo's writing to cross the threshold from "the time in the twentieth century that has narrative quality" into "the time in the twenty-first century that has no narrative quality." In this perspective, the creation of *The Body Artist*, which was published in the first year of the new millennium and succeeded in ingeniously representing the "*pure empty form of time*", is the political and historical procedure necessary for DeLillo himself to perform "becoming" into a writer who endeavors to represent the "unrepresentable"—the empty time and space of the twenty-first century.

\*The original version of this essay was orally presented at the 54th General Meeting of the American Literature Society of Japan on October 10, 2015, at Kyoto University, Kyoto.

### Notes

- 1 In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo insists that nonsense words of children lead us to the “alternate reality” that adults cannot possibly grasp (DeCurtis 72).
- 2 Longmuir sees Lauren’s body as a site of “political resistance in an aesthetic that can escape absorption into the dominant culture” in that her transgendered body performance “disrupts the operation of power relations by successfully replacing a singular, phallic conception of the body with one that is multiple and genital” (528, 541).

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