Indulging in the Poetic Jouissance:

Language, Art, and Politics in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*

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Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) can be classified as an "SF" novel in two ways: one as science fiction and the other as speculative fiction. The novel, set in a human cryopreservation facility called "the Convergence," speculates on "[l]ife after death" (9). The Convergence project is led by Ross Lockhart, a billionaire in his late sixties. Ross decides to cryopreserve his beloved young second wife Artis Martineau, who has been affected by an incurable disease, with the hope of restoring her to full health in the future when biomedical technology is more advanced. When questioned about his confidence in the project, he boastfully says, "Complete. Medically, technologically, philosophically" (8). The word "convergence" by definition means things coming together from different directions and meeting at one point. There is no more appropriate name than "the Convergence" to describe Ross's project, which aims to bring together all wisdom in one place and catapult humanity to a higher dimension.

In the future, humans who awaken from cryopreservation are expected to become a new species with more enhanced bodies than before the cryopreservation process, thanks to advanced technology. In addition to the physical body, language is also expected to take a leap to a new dimension. The language spoken by the new humans will function as a "transparent window" for communication, converging diverse meanings of a word into one fixed meaning.

Against such a new language, in *Zero K,* "poetic language" is pitted as a language with the potential to produce a wide variety of meanings. In fact, DeLillo

has been a novelist with an extraordinary interest in poetic language ever since the beginning of his career, but previous studies have not fully explored DeLillo's prose from that perspective.[1] In an interview with Adam Begley, DeLillo confides that the "sound and look" of words are superior to their "meanings" when he is penning sentences:

> I construct sentences. There's a rhythm I hear that drives me through a sentence. And the words typed on the white page have a sculptural quality. . . . They match up not just through meaning but through sound and look. The rhythm of a sentence will accommodate a certain number of syllables. One syllable too many, I look for another word. There's always another word that means nearly the same thing, and if it doesn't then I'll consider altering the meaning of a sentence to keep the rhythm, the syllable beat. I'm completely willing to let language press meaning upon me. Watching the way in which words match up, keeping the balance in a sentence—these are sensuous pleasures. (91)

Before anything else, DeLillo pays great attention to the sound and shape of words—that is, "the materiality of words disconnected from meaning" (Barrett 63). Then, he inscribes letters on white pages like sculptors do and constructs sentences like architects do. Abandoning the authorship to control meanings, but instead playing with syllables, rhythm, and shape of words, the sentences thus constructed bring "sensuous pleasures" while exposing the intensity of words even beyond the author's expectation.

This state of jouissance is, however, so ephemeral that it rarely endures "for extended periods, for paragraphs and pages" (Begley 90). On the other hand, DeLillo asserts that "poets must have more access to this state than novelists do" (Begley 90). He thus longs for "poetic language," which, from his perspective, can

be defined as language constructed primarily on syllables, sounds, and rhythm. Nevertheless, DeLillo's poetic language has yet to receive a theoretical approach to prove its importance. This essay will provide a detailed analysis of *Zero K*'s text in terms of language, art, and politics, and will employ the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Julia Kristeva to elucidate the creativity of DeLillo's poetic language.

The Convergence Haunted by the Apparitions of Divergence

Zero K opens with Ross's apocalyptic words: "*Everybody wants to own the end of the world*" (3; emphasis in original). This remark resonates with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's concept of "the Omega Point," which is the point where "everything that rises must converge" (Teilhard 13)[2] at the far end of the ultimate evolution of human beings. Summed up in Ross's apocalyptic words, therefore, are his ultimate progressive desires to own not only the Omega Point but also the catastrophes of the world beyond the Omega Point.[3] The opening scene, however, seems to be overshadowed by images of "divergence"—an antonym of "convergence":

> *Everybody wants to own the end of the world.*
>
> This is what my father [Ross] said, standing by the contoured windows in his New York office. . . . I [Jeff] studied the art in the room, variously abstract, and began to understand that the extended silence following his remark belonged to neither one of us. I thought of his wife, the second, the archaeologist, the one whose mind and failing body soon begin to drift, on schedule, into the void. (3)

Immediately after Ross's apocalyptic remark, Jeffery Lockhart, the book's narrator and Ross's son from his first marriage, studies the art described as "variously ab-

stract." Although there is no description of what specific artwork he is viewing, abstract art also appears in other DeLillo works, such as that of Mark Rothko in *Cosmopolis* (2003). In fact, *Cosmopolis*' young protagonist Eric has much in common with Ross in that they are both billionaires and art collectors. In this regard, Ross could be considered an older version of Eric.

A characteristic of Rothko's paintings, where several colors are used, is the appearance of a single deep color as if the brushstrokes are cohered. Upon examining his paintings from a broader perspective, however, each color does not necessarily intersect, which gives the paintings a hazy impression. In fact, the opening scene of *Zero K* is portrayed as a Rothko painting. Rothko was well known as an artist devoted to Sigmund Freud and famously pursued the possibility of releasing unconscious energy (Breslin 160). If Jeff is viewing the abstract art in this vein, his consciousness would not concentrate at one point but rather disseminate into the dim world of the unconscious. Similarly, the "silence" following Ross's apocalyptic remark spreads like ripples and even seems to diverge without converging on anyone. Finally, Jeff's stream of consciousness is directed to Artis, foregrounding her mind and body, which begin to "drift into the void."

In this manner, the opening of *Zero K* somehow avoids "focusing" and evokes images of "divergence," which is at the opposite end of the spectrum from "convergence." Jeff and Ross, in fact, recognize that meanings with subtle differences diffuse within the word "convergence":

> "The Convergence."
>
> "Yes."
>
> "There's a meaning in mathematics."
>
> "There's a meaning in biology. There's a meaning in physiology. Let it rest," he [Ross] said. (9)

They discuss the fact that the word is used in at least three different fields: mathematics, biology, and physiology. In addition to these, it is also used in fields such as meteorology, cultural anthropology, geopolitics, media, and economics. Ross's remark "Let it rest," nevertheless, indicates not only his indifference to the diversity of meaning but also his excessive desire to reduce the polysemy of words to univocality.

However, what if Ross's forceful attitude toward the word "convergence" derives from his unconscious desire to suppress the divergent quality of meanings inherent in the word? In other words, Ross's strong desire to cohere everything at one point may be the flipside of his anxiety about its divergence. If that is the case, the Convergence has the potential to easily turn into divergence.[4] That is, increasing "cohesion" may potentially (or appartionally) mean holding equivalent "diffusibility." In the following sections, by referring to DeLillo's other works, Deleuze's concept of "the fold," and Kristeva's theory of poetic language, we will visualize the apparitions of "divergence" haunting the Convergence.

The Language of the Convergence and *Mao II*

Those who awaken from the cryopreservation in the future are expected to be restored by advanced nanotechnology and become new humans with more enhanced bodies than before (48). It is also anticipated that "[t]hose who eventually emerge from the capsules will be ahistorical humans. They will be free of the flatlines of the past, the attenuated minute and hour" (130). The new humans will thus transcend the continuity and accumulation of history experienced by their bodies before they were cryopreserved.

Moreover, in addition to the bodies, language will also leap to a new dimension:

"And they will speak a new language, according to Ross."

"A language isolate, beyond all affiliation with other languages," he said.

"To be taught to some, implanted in others, those already in cryopreservation."

A system that will offer new meanings, entire new levels of perception.

It will expand our reality, deepen the reach of our intellect. It will remake us, he said.

We will know ourselves as never before, blood, brain and skin.

We will approximate the logic and beauty of pure mathematics in everyday speech. No similes, metaphors, analogies. A language that will not shrink from whatever forms of objective truth we have never before experienced. (130)

The language spoken by new humans is expected to be free from similes, metaphors, and analogies and will therefore function as a "transparent window" or "Newspeak," as in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). In this kind of language based on mathematical aesthetics, which accurately expresses objective truth, meanings of words are forced to converge into a single meaning without diverging.

However, a language that suppresses a variety of meanings but honors the transparency of words is liable to create a totalitarian society. For example, DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991) describes how Chinese citizens assimilate with the top leader of the nation, Mao Zedong, by repeatedly reading *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*:

Children memorize parts of stories their parents tell them. They want the same story again and again. Don't change a word or they get terribly upset.

> This is the unchanged narrative every culture needs in order to survive. In China the narrative belonged to Mao. People memorized it and recited it to assert the destiny of their revolution. So the experience of Mao became uncorruptible by outside forces. It became the living memory of hundreds of millions of people. The cult of Mao was the cult of the book. It was a call to unity, a summoning of crowds where everyone dressed alike and thought alike. Don't you see the beauty in this? Isn't there beauty and power in the repetition of certain words and phrases? (162)

They memorize Mao's words without mistaking a single word. This helps indoctrinate them into Mao's single dogma, which becomes their only objective truth, accordingly giving him absolute power. A kind of aesthetic sensation is thus found in the spectacle where people are unified under a single, monolithic ideology through such language as Mao's *Little Red Book,* which has rigid semantic effects. Then, such a linguistic process gives birth to a totalitarian state that exalts a dictator like Mao.

The Intersection of Language, Art, and Politics

In the previous section, comparing the language of the Convergence with that of Mao, we have clarified the totalitarian political regime generated by the univocal semantic effect. In this section, in addition to the language issue, by focusing on the aesthetic aspect of the Convergence, we will further examine the politics glimpsed in the Convergence, which advocates "life after death." In a sense, the goal of the Convergence is "ultimate freedom" in terms of liberating individuals from the biological constraints of life and expanding human life infinitely. Contrary to such biological liberalism, however, the Convergence casts a shadow of totalitarianism. In the climax, Jeff reaches the deepest section of the Convergence,

where he witnesses a number of bodies in cryonic pods:

> All pods faced in the same direction, dozens, then hundreds, and our path took us through the middle of these structured ranks. The bodies were arranged across an enormous floor space, people of various skin color, uniformly positioned, eyes closed, arms crossed on chest, legs pressed tight, no sign of excess flesh. (256)

The array of frozen bodies—"faced in the same direction," "uniformly positioned," "regal in their cryonic bearing" (256)—brings to mind a scene of a totalitarian state from an old, dystopian movie.

Furthermore, it is remarkable that on seeing the bodies, Jeff thinks "of lavishly choreographed dance routines from Hollywood musicals of many decades past, dancers synchronized in the manner of a marching army" (257). This image of dancers can be likened to a line dance of the Rockettes in DeLillo's monumental masterpiece *Underworld* (1997), which portrays the underhistory of America in the Cold War era:

> They [The Rockettes] were wearing West Point gray and came out saluting, thirty-six women remade as interchangeable parts, height, shape, race, and type, with plumed dress hats and fringed titties and faces buttered a christmassy pink but isn't it odd they're wearing bondage collars—saluting and high-kicking in machine unison and Klara thought they were kind of great and so did everyone else. Snapping into close formation, tap-dancing in a wash of iridescent arcs, all symmetry and drill precision, then fanning open in kaleidoscopic bursts. . . . (428)

In general, as a symbol of patriotism, the Rockettes' dances are often performed

in events such as military ceremonies, the Fourth of July, the inauguration of a president, and so on. When depicting the Rockettes in *Underworld,* however, DeLillo is aware of some totalitarian inclination latent in their patriotic performance, as he describes it with words such as "West Point gray," "interchangeable parts," "bondage collars," "machine unison," and "all symmetry and drill precision." Taking into consideration the political context of the Cold War, it is obvious that DeLillo's description of the Rockettes' dance aims at deconstructing the dichotomy between America's democracy and the Soviet Union's totalitarianism.

Even more noteworthy is that Sergei Eisenstein's *Underweld,* a fictional film created by DeLillo, is screened after the Rockettes' performance. The film is like an apocalyptic, dystopian, zombie movie in which an army associated with the Rockettes is endlessly exterminating those deformed by scientific experiments conducted underground. Interestingly, the post-humans in *Underweld* are similar to those in the Convergence in that the deformed humans exist "outside nationality and strict historical context" (*U* 443). Similarly, in addition to the ahistorical nature, the post-humans of the Convergence are likened to "mannequins in convoluted mass" and portrayed as "neutered humans, men and women stripped of identity" (134). Nevertheless, there is a stark contrast between the two: the post-humans in the Convergence are expressed as "idealized human[s]" (258), whereas those in *Underweld* are expressed as "deformed faces" (*U* 443). This contrast, however, possibly indicates that utopian and dystopian aspects of post-humans are related to each other as two sides of the same coin. Jeff at least senses a breath of totalitarianism in the "mannequined lives" under the control of the ultimate technology:

> Instead I [Jeff] wondered if I was looking at the controlled future, men and women being subordinated, willingly or not, to some form of centralized command. Mannequined lives. . . . Other things here, the halls, the veers, the

> fabricated garden, the food units, the unidentifiable food, or when does utilitarian become totalitarian. (146-47)

Comparing *Zero K* with *Underworld* as above and reconsidering Jeff's imagination that transforms the frozen bodies into the synchronized dancers, it is apparent that there is a kind of totalitarian politics latent in the Convergence. While feeling uncomfortable with such dystopian politics, Jeff cannot help but admire the sublime beauty of the frozen bodies as "visionary art" (256-57). The complicated feeling that Jeff bears toward the Convergence implies a dangerous relationship between politics and aesthetics. Keiko Ishida emphasizes the significance of art in fascist regimes as follows:

> By presenting the thesis of "the aestheticization of politics," [Walter] Benjamin has already illustrated that art has significance in fascism. The thesis, however, should not be understood on the surface level of an idea that fascism aestheticizes political acts by exquisitely dramatizing the convention of a party. Rather, the essentials of the thesis, as [Jean-Luc] Nancy and [Philippe] Lacoue-Labarthe aptly state, lie in "the production of political matter as art." They find the essentials of Nazism in the process of myth-making, which they call "ficionnement." Besides, a significant factor their "myth" adds is "figuration" as the art of fiction-making. . . . Borrowing the power of figuration, fascism realizes their fictional myth and creates an identical world with no contradictions. (22-23; my trans.)

In this way, fascism creates myths by utilizing art and brings their controlling power into effect by turning the myths into presence. Likewise, the Convergence attempts to realize its myth of "life after death" or "the post-human utopia" by enshrining frozen bodies in the sublime beauty of art. It is this process of myth-

making that would produce “biopolitics as art” and the totalitarian biopower in the future society. Obviously, there must be a symptom of fascism arising at the intersection of politics, aesthetics, and language with rigid semantic effects. In this case, the aesthetics of the Convergence that pursues “ultimate freedom” of “eternal life” holds the paradox that it is complicit with politics that suppresses such freedom.

Welcome to the Convergence, or the (Un)folded Labyrinth

In the previous section, we highlighted the rigid and narrow ideology that flickers in the sublime beauty woven from the frozen bodies. In contrast, Jeff also has a completely different perspective of the frozen body art: He thinks that the frozen body art has “broad implications” (256) and is therefore unable to determine its meaning. In the first place, it should not be overlooked that the facility of the Convergence, enchased with various abstract artworks, attires itself in excessive design. This section will analyze the architectural design of the Convergence from a meta perspective with Deleuze’s concept of “the fold” as a reference point.

Deleuze’s concept of “the fold” is developed from Leibniz’s monadology. Leibniz emphasizes the independence of monads with the phrase “monads have no windows.” The Convergence embodies a monadic universe in that its exterior is described as “self-contained” or “invisibly windowed” (4, 5). Moreover, the buildings of the Convergence are “designed to fold into themselves” (4-5), thus forming folds within. Deleuze explains “the fold” as follows:

> [A] flexible or an elastic body still has cohering parts that form a fold, such that they are not separated into parts of parts but are rather divided to infinity in smaller and smaller folds that always retain a certain cohesion. Thus a continuous labyrinth is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flow-

> ing sand might dissolve into grains, but resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds. . . . (6)

If a cohesion—a synonym of convergence—forms a folded labyrinth, Jeff is in effect straying into the labyrinth of the Convergence, where he is puzzled by Ross's wildcat project and the abstract architectural design of the buildings—both ideologically and spatially. Whenever he is in the Convergence, he tries to explore and inspect the interiors:

> I [Jeff] spent time walking the halls. . . . Blank walls, no windows, doors widely spaced, all doors shut. These were doors of related colors, subdued, and I wondered if there was meaning to be found in these slivers of the spectrum. This was what I did in any new environment. I tried to inject meaning, make the place coherent or at least locate myself within the place, to confirm my uneasy presence. (10)

Jeff, as the "narrator," struggles to find meaning in the interior of the Convergence, which is painted in mysterious colors, though he can hardly determine the exact meaning. Perhaps, Jeff is invited to the Convergence for critical inspection of the project but nevertheless does not have enough vocabulary to narrate the Convergence.

The more Jeff describes the Convergence, the more he reveals his incompetence as a narrator. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the act of "narrating" itself is inextricably linked to the act of "unfolding a fold." In explaining Deleuze's concept of "the fold," a word often cited is "explicate," which, by definition, is to explain an idea or a work of literature in significant detail. This word includes the prefix "ex-" which means "out" and the word "pli" which means "fold" or "pleat." "Ex-pli-cate" thus refers to the act of "unfolding a fold outward."

However, as Deleuze indicates that "[a] fold is always folded within a fold" and therefore "divided into infinite folds" (6), it is almost impossible to unfold all the folds. Jeff can, in fact, produce another new fold through the act of "narrating (or writing)" while unfolding a fold. Masaki Sawano discusses the relationship between Deleuze's concept of "the fold" and the act of "writing letters":

> Letters composed of lines and curves variously long and short are a combination of pleats and an assemblage of folds. The string of letters written here is not only a Japanese expression but a result of thinking and also a material of thinking. In other words, a string of letters written in a book is folds of thinking and folds for thinking. (148; my trans.)

Considering "[u]nfolding is thus not the contrary of folding, but follows the fold up to the following fold" (Deleuze 6), Jeff, through his narrating/writing of the Convergence, unfolds its folds and simultaneously produces "new folds of his own thinking," into which he forces his readers to stray. Furthermore, when explicating *Zero K* and unfolding the folds of Jeff's thinking, readers also produce "new folds of their own thinking" into which we force someone else to stray. Thus, the boundary between convergence and divergence would become extremely ambiguous when the production and unfolding of folds are infinitely repeated through the act of narrating/writing. Rather, convergence and divergence can be always and already occurring simultaneously.

Coda

Now that the simultaneity of convergence and divergence has been revealed, we will consider the significance of the narrator Jeff by analyzing the last scene of *Zero K* and using Julia Kristeva's theory of "poetic language" as a reference

point. In the final scene, after returning to his daily life in New York from the (un)folded labyrinth of the Convergence, Jeff witnesses the poetic and dramatic sight of the setting sun aligned with the east-west streets of the main street grid of Manhattan. This event, witnessed only twice a year, was coined as "Manhattanhenge" by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson in 2002. As its spelling suggests, this neologism derives from "Stonehenge," a prehistoric monument in Wiltshire, England. Therefore, the word "Manhattanhenge" not only signifies the setting sun Jeff is *presently* seeing but also alludes to an "archaeological time in the past."

This poetic sunset abruptly reminds Jeff of Ross's apocalyptic remark in the opening scene: "Then there is Ross, once again, in his office, the lurking image of my father telling me that *everybody wants to own the end of the world*" (274). However, this remark, evoked again with Manhattanhenge as a backdrop, would have a different meaning from the first time it is used in the opening—for the verb "own" not only means "possess" but also "admit" or "acknowledge."

Perhaps, when viewing the setting sun in Stonehenge, contemporaries cannot help but feel a kind of nostalgia for the twilight of ancient civilization. The same is true of those from the future when they witness Manhattanhenge as the remains of our culture. It is suggestive that Tyson envisages Manhattanhenge as the remains of "an apocalyptic Earth":

> You read anthropological books where they're always looking at some ancient culture. If they didn't have writing, you have to infer what they valued. So I [Tyson] thought: An apocalyptic Earth, if there's nothing that survives but our street grid, what would they say of us? Surely, future anthropologists would argue that we arranged our grid to align with the sun on purpose on those days, and what could they learn about our culture? (LaFrance)

When Jeff remembers Ross's apocalyptic remark face-to-face with Manhattan-

henge, its meaning would be reversed to "everybody wants to *admit* the end of the world." If so, Jeff is probably foreseeing the twilight of our culture in the future beyond the present sunset. Here, two different time schemes emerge: Jeff's "future-oriented outlook" and "the past" that the word Manhattanhenge alludes to. Then, suspended between the past and the future is the present when he is just seeing the setting sun.

In addition to this "suspended present," it is also important to note the "urgent cries" (273) of a boy who is also watching Manhattanhenge next to Jeff. As "prelinguistic grunts" (274), the boy's cries do not make any sense. Jeff, nevertheless, thinks that "these howls of awe [are] far more suitable than words" (274). As he stated in an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo has been persistently fascinated with such "infantile babbling."[5] According to Julia Kristeva, the infantile babbling has a close connection to "poetic language"; in her theory of poetic language, poets find a kind of jouissance in the nonsense words of infants (Nishikawa 204). Jeff may indulge himself in such jouissance when finally feeling no need to watch the setting sun and instead only listening to the boy's cries.

When "poetic language" and "the suspended present" converge, there should be a possibility to narrate history; for Kristeva insists that "by thus suspending the present moment, by straddling rhythmic, meaningless, anterior memory with meaning intended for later or forever, poetic language structures itself as the very nucleus of a monumental historicity" (32). In other words, poetic language is "the most appropriate *historical* discourse" (Kristeva 33; emphasis in original) in that while suspending the present, it consistently transmits the rhythm echoing from the past into the future. If that is the case, the narration by Jeff, who has found the jouissance in poetic language, would contain a chance of deconstructing the discourse of the Convergence that creates "ahistorical humans."

Moreover, the most significant characteristic of poetic language is the undecidability of its meaning. According to Kristeva, "[i]t is poetic language that awak-

ens our attention to this undecidable character of any so-called natural language, a feature that univocal, rational, scientific discourse tends to hide" (135). Furthermore, such poetic language encourages "the never-finished, undefined production of a new space of significance" (Kristeva 113). Therefore, the undecidability of poetic language, which continues to spread new meanings, leads to the melting of fixed (or frozen) semantic effects of the language of the Convergence, which could possibly converge to a monolithic ideology. This meltdown of frozen language visualizes the apparitions of divergence lurking in the Convergence.

Thus, Jeff, whom DeLillo calls "a kind of human implausibility meter" (Boxall 164), should give us the opportunity to continually rethink the progressive society that blindly aims to converge at the Omega Point. With the narrator Jeff, who has found pleasure in poetic language, we can annotate the words of Father Teilhard as follows: "Everything that rises must *not only* converge *but also diverge.*"

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Notes

1 DeLillo's recent works feature female poets who play important roles in the narratives. Examples of such poets include Elise Shifrin, wife of the protagonist of *Cosmopolis,* and Tessa Berens of *The Silence* (2020).

2 This phrase is also known as the title of a short novel by Flannery O'Connor, who was influenced by Teilhard's idea. In terms of "theological scepticim," David Cowart compares DeLillo with O'Connor (144).

3 In his previous work for *Zero K, Point Omega* (2010), DeLillo presents an apocalyptic vision that follows the Omega Point:

> We're a crowd, a swarm. We think in groups, travel in armies. Armies carry the gene for self-destruction. One bomb is never enough. The blur of technology, this

is where the oracles plot their wars. Because now comes the introversion. Father Teilhard knew this, the omega point. A leap out of our biology. Ask yourself this question. Do we have to be human forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field. (52-53)

4 Noting its etymology, Katsuaki Watanabe states that the word "convergence" contains a deconstructive opportunity that it never converges because a movement approaching to the limit endlessly continues, like an asymptote (288).

5 In the interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo mentions, "Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, you know, could be viewed as a higher form of infantile babbling. It's babbling which seems to mean something, and this is intriguing" (DeCurtis 72). He also insists that practicing "glossolalia," or "speaking in tongues," as "a higher form of infantile babbling" opens up a direct route to "an alternate reality" (DeCurtis 72).

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