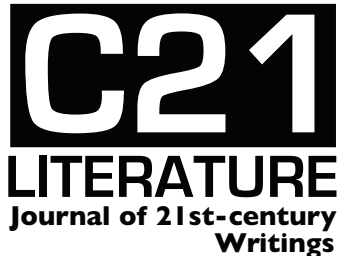




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## Article

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ARTICLE

## Changing Channels of Technology: Disaster and (Im)mortality in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, *Cosmopolis* and *Zero K*

Ross Maffey and Yugin Teo

Bournemouth University, GB

Corresponding author: Yugin Teo ([yteo@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:yteo@bournemouth.ac.uk))

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This article examines the changing representation of technology in three of DeLillo's novels, *White Noise*, *Cosmopolis* and *Zero K*, and traces the conceptual and philosophical developments in his writing concerning the two key themes of disaster and mortality. Disasters witnessed through technological means consistently distance the 'real' from the event in earlier work such as *White Noise*, whereas in *Cosmopolis*, Eric Packer, the central character, yearns for disasters to happen to himself. DeLillo's latest novel *Zero K* represents a clear sense of ending and longing for disaster. Secondly, technology changes from promoting a fear of death in earlier works, to a fear of life in *Zero K*, highlighting the bleakness of life in a world ruled by technology. This article will discuss these two progressions in detail across the three novels, followed by a conclusion of the comparisons titled 'Changing Channels' for each theme, producing an original perspective of the diachronic changes through DeLillo's work.

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**Keywords:** DeLillo; *Zero K*; technology; disaster; death; mortality

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Don DeLillo has long been considered to be a novelist ahead of his time, lauded for an uncanny prescience in his writing and for being instrumental in conveying an alternative, sobering view of late twentieth century and early twenty-first century America. DeLillo's 1985 breakout work, *White Noise*, depicts a world in which technology and consumerism generate a stranglehold across multiple aspects of life. Even before the arrival of the internet or mobile phones, DeLillo envisioned society to be something that closely resembles what we increasingly see today, over thirty years after its publication:

More than any other major American author, DeLillo has examined the manner in which contemporary American consciousness has been shaped by the historically unique incursion into daily life of information, military, and consumer technologies. (Laist 2010b: 3)

DeLillo's 2003 novel, *Cosmopolis*, provides an account of the influence of twenty-first century cyber-capital, and the way in which technology has been integrated into everyday life, forming a dependence on these systems. DeLillo's 2016 novel, *Zero K*, explores technology's impact on the human condition, and what is left for society in a world where technology controls the fragile boundary between life and death. The speed of technological progression, including the emergence of the internet and mobile phones affected his portrayal of contemporary society through various stages of his writing. These three novels were selected as the primary source material not only because of the unique relationship depicted between characters and technology (in a general sense, as opposed to specific iterations of technology), but also because these texts allow for a more detailed and wide-ranging discussion on DeLillo's developing philosophical approach to technology and his understanding of its influence. Technology pervades all aspects of these novels, unlike others where it is just one of many themes being represented.

This article examines the way in which technology progresses across two key themes throughout the three works specified above. Beginning with the theme of disaster, and followed after by the theme of mortality, shifts in technological representation across the three novels are explored, examining the portrayal and implications of the presence of technology, and investigating the philosophical reasoning behind these changes. We explore how technology mediates and softens our reception to disaster, and how technology has been influential in producing a profound fear of both death and life. Disaster and death frequently occur as key concerns in DeLillo's oeuvre, and this is examined as the first theme and section. Technology becomes the way through which characters experience these concerns and, in turn, produces a society whereby disaster is seen as a spectacular event, both consumed and desired by society. Frequently, events are encountered purely via television or

other forms of technology, and their occurrence only considered real if mediated through these devices. Technology is able to produce a diversion from foreboding thoughts of death as it offers an existence that has no physical limitations, and is not degraded by time. The second section on the theme of mortality examines how as the reader encounters each text chronologically, DeLillo's concerns shift from a view of technology as an avoidance of death, to a view of technology as an avoidance of life. The two sections on disaster and mortality are each followed by a conclusion titled 'Changing Channels', summarising the changes in DeLillo's perspective over time.

This article identifies shifts in his conceptual viewpoint concerning technology and the two themes through the texts, generating literary discussion on each text and synthesising them to highlight an original argument within existing scholarship, regarding the changes in DeLillo's perspective over time, as exhibited through his work. This article will consider 'technology' to be physical equipment used by his characters in their everyday lives. For the most part, it will specify the use of screens, computers and televisions throughout the novels, and discuss how these present a confusion, distancing and overthrowing of reality throughout both themes of disaster and mortality, utilising Jean Baudrillard as a central theorist. Although the use of technology becomes more explicit and commonplace as the texts progress chronologically, it is not the presence of such devices that drives the changes directly, it is rather their relationship with characters in the novels, and the way they are perceived that is of greater importance in this study. The framework here allows for an establishing of thematic links between disaster and mortality amongst the three novels (rather than examining each novel in isolation), as well as pinpointing how the novels represent these themes diachronically from the mid-1980s to the present, and what the implications are regarding DeLillo's changing perspective on technology.

### **A Longing for Disaster**

Major developments in technology and media have resulted in the widespread distribution and coverage of events in contemporary society, most prominently those of disaster. DeLillo repeatedly draws attention to the coverage of disasters mediated through technology, and the effects imposed on the characters in his work. Once

mainly a fascination for characters in *White Noise*, disaster develops into an object of pursuit in DeLillo's later works *Cosmopolis* and *Zero K*. Utilising DeLillo's 'In the Ruins of the Future' and related work by Baudrillard, this section examines how these texts, in varying ways, portray disaster in a technological era.

*White Noise* follows a year in the life of Jack Gladney, Professor of Hitler Studies at College-on-the-Hill, his fifth wife Babette and their four children. DeLillo explores the Gladneys' apparent excitement (Green 1999: 582) when witnessing disaster footage together on television:

That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set [...] There were floods, earthquakes, mudslides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty. (DeLillo 1985: 75)

Previously bored or restless, the catastrophic images are both comforting and pleasurable to the family. The scenes that should rationally provoke sympathy, sadness or sorrow, perform the opposite effect for the Gladneys. When watching disaster communally through television, the family feel a sense of belonging. As they are 'absorbed' in 'clips of calamity and death,' the Gladneys feel it is their 'duty' to witness these disastrous events (1985: 75). DeLillo highlights the transformation of the American home whereby entertainment and communication have been replaced by technology. Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime expresses the way in which disastrous events can in fact be viewed with beauty and 'delight' by viewers (1998: 44). DeLillo picks up on this satisfaction within the Gladneys' reactions, and goes on to explain in an interview with Adam Begley in 1993 that television is linked with disaster because this 'charges the culture' and that television has a 'panting lust for bad news and calamity,' intoning that technology has a tendency to eroticise negative footage in the form of disaster (DeLillo 1993). The Gladneys' absorption of visual disasters highlights the 'lust' that DeLillo describes and displays Burke's theory of the sublime, giving an eroticised dimension to the footage, highlighting the changes in American contemporary society regarding the replacement of more traditional forms of entertainment with technology. Interestingly, DeLillo's idea that disaster

footage 'charges' the culture suggests that society itself has mimicked features of the technology that saturates the archetypal postmodern home, and that the running of society depends on being fully charged and technologically dependent to function correctly. Furthermore, in *White Noise*, 'each disaster made [them] wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping' (1985: 76), revealing a sense of addiction that the family have from continuously watching violent footage. Within the novel, Alphonse Stompanato, Jack's colleague, a professor at College-on-the-Hill, speaks of the drug-like psychological effects media coverage inflicts on subjects in society: 'We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information' (1985: 77), but by 'catastrophe,' Stompanato refers to the witnessing of such events through technological means.

In 1994's *Simulation and Simulacra*, Baudrillard explores the way in which societies experience the real through a variety of simulation models. These models lead to an inability in distinguishing the real from the model, or the original from the copy. With today's technologically advanced society providing an abundance of simulation models, the concept of hyperreality is more prevalent and noticeable than ever before. Similar to the way in which Jack mistakes someone shown on the television screen to be an actual person talking (1985: 286), sustaining a momentary breakdown in distinguishing reality and who it is that is speaking. The television becomes more real than reality itself through this distinction, representative of the hyper-real world in which postmodern American society is situated, saturating people's homes and lives. In his 1995 collection of essays, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Baudrillard further suggests that instead of real disaster eliciting pleasure (in the mode of Burke's theory of the sublime), it is the coverage of such events through technological means that draw out 'hallucinogenic pleasure' in postmodern society, once more referring to drug-like symptoms as we do not require 'the taste for real drama or real war' (1995: 75) when these can be replicated through technology. Baudrillard suggests that instead of the real event, replications through technology have superior potency and effect. DeLillo's portrayal of the Gladneys in *White Noise* succinctly displays the pleasure and addiction Baudrillard and Stompanato refer to

when witnessing disaster through technological means, and the reliance they have formed upon it to give them a sense of heightened fulfilment. As DeLillo has mentioned, the 'darker' the news, the 'better' it becomes in terms of consumption and success as a media commodity in American culture, as society has become desensitised to the severity of catastrophe upon its replications through technology (Evans 1991).

However, when disaster strikes the Gladneys in their real lives, away from technology, they are unable to comprehend its legitimacy in *White Noise*. During the Airborne Toxic Event, a chemical spill that produces a large black cloud prompting an evacuation, Jack senses it is not actually taking place because these occurrences 'happen to poor people who live in exposed areas ... These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith' (1985: 133). The Gladneys' technological saturation at witnessing disaster through television has detached the coverage of the events from the events themselves (Baudrillard 1995), and in order to understand the seriousness of the disaster, they must consult the radio and the television as their source of truth to comprehend what is happening. Since previously the only way in which they would encounter disaster was through television, the Gladneys do not believe it can exist in their real lives. The medium of television and radio have the power to alter the Gladneys' views entirely, regardless of their first-hand experiences. Only when the radio tells the Gladneys of the severity of the 'black billowing cloud' (1985: 132) and the 'airborne toxic event' (1985: 136), do they start to comprehend the reality of the situation.

Within his post-9/11 essay, 'In the Ruins of the Future,' DeLillo states that a 'layer of consciousness' has been stripped away as a result of the confusion coming from media coverage of events (2001: 12). Echoing the Gladneys' experiences, DeLillo highlights the distancing effect that technology inflicts regarding the real, and how disaster is not feared, but instead enjoyed and consumed when relayed through technology due to its sublime nature and the desensitisation that comes through technological repetition. Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra is relevant here as the repetition of disasters through television has resulted in the Gladneys

not understanding the real event, and 'the real' is lost within simulation models of the original, provided through technology which has allowed for events to 'exist' and be 'played and replayed' (DeLillo 1993). Each replication devalues the event that is being shown and instead gives precedence to the process of repetition and simulation, allowing for the Gladneys to develop lust and addiction to disaster footage. The Gladneys become, in the words of Baudrillard, 'hostages to media intoxication' (1995: 25) resulting from their susceptibility to technological interference and confusion.

DeLillo's thirteenth novel, *Cosmopolis* (2003), follows the journey of Eric Packer during his limousine ride across New York to get a haircut. Packer's limousine, which provides the setting for the majority of the novel, is inundated with 'plasma screens,' 'spycams,' 'visual display units,' and so on, meaning the only reality Packer is exposed to is mediated through technology. For Packer, the disparity between technological virtuality and reality is one that cannot be distinguished, as he is completely engulfed in his technological surroundings:

He used to sit here in hand-held space but that was finished now. The context was nearly touchless. He could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen. (2003a: 13)

This erasure of the buffer zone between Packer and technology has led to him being situated within it, with no 'interface' present to separate him from the technology (Laist 2010a: 266), resulting in Packer forgetting how ordinary humanity looks and sounds. Packer's reality is one that constitutes him being part of the technology, a cog in a machine, a line of code within a system. Even Elise, his wife, has to physically touch Packer to ensure 'he was here and real' (2003a: 25), rather than him 'melting into the texture of everyday life' (2003a: 104) along with the technology that allowed him to create his multi-billion dollar fortune. Packer cannot be told apart from the technology, reflecting the way he cannot distinguish reality from virtuality as the real has been entirely replaced by a hyperreal state (Baudrillard 1995). Similar to the Gladneys, Packer does not understand the disasters that are taking place outside his limousine until these are viewed through technology. Initially being confused



as to what is happening, it is the presence of television and the relaying of information technologically that gives Packer the ability to verify his first hand experiences, rather than the expected opposite: 'This made more sense on TV [...] channelled through the dish antennas of TV trucks' (2003a: 98). Technological devices become essential to Packer in understanding first-hand, real life events as a result of his media saturation; without media coverage, he would not be certain if an event really took place.

DeLillo appears to develop the theme of disaster from one of pleasure and confusion, towards one of desire with regard to technology. In the works of *Cosmopolis* and *Zero K*, characters become more frequently involved in disasters, often as a result of their own will and yearning. As Jeremy Green (1999: 581) has noted, commonly within DeLillo's work it is the disasters involving 'breakdown of technological systems' that evoke the greatest interest. Even disasters that stem from natural occurrences are seen to signify a failure of the predictive power of technology. It is only in DeLillo's later works, however, that these fears of technological failure are exposed and acted upon. Within 'In the Ruins of the Future,' DeLillo describes the relationship between the World Trade Centre and technology, and the way that they had become an 'emblem for advanced technology' (2001: 12) within contemporary society. Packer, a man with technological influences entwined in both his reality and identity, could also be seen to reflect the disaster of the twin towers through his death in the novel. Despite his eventual assassination by former employee, Benno Levin, Packer commits a form of suicide as an 'avatar of hypercapitalism' (Conte 2008: 190), symbolically resembling the falling of a 'third twin tower' (Laist 2010b: 153), and a method of displaying technology's threat of destruction in contemporary society. As Kauffman notes, the September 11th attacks saw terrorists use America's 'technology against [them],' causing catastrophe and disaster using their own planes as 'missiles' (2008: 357). Packer seems to replicate this very process through driving himself to his own death using the 'very technologies that he claims to master' in manipulating cyber-capital and substituting reality for the virtuality of technology (Veggian 2015: 90).

Jean Baudrillard's essay, 'The Spirit of Terrorism,' also discusses the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Baudrillard described it as 'the mother of all events' and that the World Trade Center was 'destroying itself – committing *suicide* in a blaze of glory [...] We wished for it' (italics mine), implying a sense of desire for the sublime event to take place (2003: 4–5). Equally, the concept that the towers were 'destroying' themselves relates to Kauffman's assertion that America's own tools were the causal factor in the towers' destruction (2008: 357). Baudrillard's argument is, however, problematic as it fails to take into consideration the emotional and human aspect of the tragedy, and solely discusses the event theoretically, detaching his argument from themes of suffering and compassion, and the impact that the event had on people's lives. Interestingly, Baudrillard seems to speak in a way that echoes Packer himself, who is concealed in his limousine, alienated from the world around him and the consequences of what is happening with regard to disaster. Packer's failure to accept that technology will one day disobey him ultimately leads to a downward spiral of events, culminating in a disaster of his own making. Packer's Chief of Theory, Vija Kinski, says that technology is 'crouched and undecidable. It can go either way' (2003a: 95). For Kinski, technology is personified, and has the capability to go in its own direction, 'crouching,' suggesting that it has the capacity to react and surprise, paralleling DeLillo's ideas that:

Technology has a kind of *will*, a *drive* [italics mine] toward being realized in three-dimensions [...] this is the will that technology seems to force on the people who guide it, or is it the other way round? [...] Is technology also one of the things that is driving us? (Evans 1991)

DeLillo argues that technology, in fact, stands superior, and the reliance on it in contemporary society has reversed the power structure that was initially installed. Technology now has the ability to control its users, and this suggests that it has a lifelike purpose and plot that we have no 'authority' over. Packer displays the obliviousness to being manipulated by the very technologies that he feels he rules, and can be said to have lost 'track of who he is,' along with Jack Gladney, in their world of technological saturation (Matković 2015: 166).

The ominous sense of disaster inherent in *Cosmopolis* is symptomatic of the desire and longing for such an event. Packer's pushing of technological boundaries results in his eventual downfall, stripping him of the wealth and life that he built around technology, and is the causal factor for his death. The 'ruin' that is 'built into the creation' (DeLillo 1985: 296) is finally revealed in DeLillo's writing in *Cosmopolis*, and Baudrillard's assertion that postmodern life is 'organized according to a script for a disaster film' (1983: 23) remains true through DeLillo's later works, as his characters continuously arrange their lives to conflict with disaster. No longer do we desire to 'see' disaster (Burke 1998: 44), but upon developments in technology, we now wish for disaster to take place.

DeLillo's most recent novel, *Zero K*, offers a refuge from the impending disaster that lies waiting within technology as the creators no longer have control over their creation. The Convergence, a compound located in Eastern Europe designed to cryogenically freeze bodies to preserve them for the future, when a cure may be found for their deficiencies, is referred to as a place of solace:

Technology has become a force of nature. We can't control it [...] there's nowhere for us to hide. Except here of course. (2016: 245)

Here, technology is once more referred to as an impending disaster, a 'force of nature,' and can be said to have replaced the fear surrounding natural disasters such as earthquakes and tidal waves that the Gladneys admire in *White Noise*. Instead, it is technology that is the primary threat to humanity, with nowhere left 'to hide,' suggesting a sense of surrender and inferiority to a technology that has overthrown society. Screens also appear throughout the Convergence, showing catastrophic images of national disasters and self-immolation that seem to leak out into the hallways of those watching. Speaking of the special 'Zero K' chamber, designed to freeze bodies without any permanent issues, an unnamed character states:

Is there something that makes you uneasy? Do you think about the technovirus, all systems down, global implosion? Or is it more personal? Do you

feel steeped in some horrific digital panic that's everywhere and nowhere?  
(2016: 239)

This passage efficiently expresses concerns postmodern society may face in the future, portraying an apocalyptic scene in which humans must take refuge from the technologies that were initially designed to make life easier. DeLillo, however, offers no clear resolution to these fears of technology, perhaps using the apocalyptic setting as a metaphor for contemporary American society's reliance on these systems, and the helplessness humans have attained as a result of their dependence and comparative inferiority to technological systems. *Zero K* effectively concludes modern society's feelings towards disaster in the following: 'Catastrophe is our bedtime story' (2016: 66). No longer is disaster something that cannot be comprehended, but it is now something that offers a sense of comfort. The entire project of the Convergence stands as a succumbing to the inevitable end of the world, an apocalyptic event due to the loss of control over technology. However, this submission appears to be one of satisfaction rather than horror.

### **Changing Channels I**

There is a persistence in the relationship between disaster and technology in these works. Within *White Noise*, DeLillo highlights the pleasure and eroticism sustained when watching disaster footage, this being the only content able to 'cut through the white noise' (Rozario 2007: 4). Due to disasters being primarily witnessed through television, when real disasters take place there is confusion as it is not familiar to characters, most notably Packer and the Gladneys. A 'layer of consciousness' has been removed for DeLillo (2001: 12), who echoes many points made by Baudrillard regarding the detachment of the event from its coverage, leading to a hyperreality when these events take place. It is not until his later works, most notably *Zero K* and *Cosmopolis*, that the fears of collapse and rebellion regarding technology come to fruition and deeply expose society's longing for disaster. In the case of DeLillo's writing, *Zero K* represents a clear sense of ending on the subject, and follows the natural progression from *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* insofar that technology is no longer

'crouched and undecidable' (2003a: 95) but, in fact, it has pounced and overthrown those who created it.

### **Death and (Im)mortality: Living on Screen**

Through technology, DeLillo's characters continually search for answers regarding life and death as DeLillo himself traverses through philosophical viewpoints on the subject. Similar to disaster, there is a progression of thought concerning this topic, offering changing perspectives as his body of work grows. With the prospects of technology widening as time elapses, so too does the research and thought into extending life and a search for immortality. DeLillo's earlier work depicts characters utilising technology as a method of disregarding thoughts about their mortality. This avoidance, in turn, develops into a search for immortality through technology in *Cosmopolis*, before *Zero K* proves technology to be instrumental in avoiding life itself, completing the movement from that pervading sense of a fear of death, to a fear of life.

The Gladneys' all-encompassing fear of death is mediated through technology in *White Noise*, as they distract themselves by being glued to the television screen. Technology helps them eradicate their fears of 'who will die first?' (1985: 17), a question that is central to the novel. However, technology also reinforces their deepest fear, as it gives Jack the means to visualise his own death: 'It is now official, according to the computer. I've got death inside me. It's just a question of whether or not I can outlive it' (1985: 175). In a similar vein to his relationship with disaster, Jack requires technology to make his death 'official' and obtain legitimacy, thereby exacerbating his fears on the subject. Within *White Noise*, DeLillo offers no resolution to the Gladneys' fears, but simply provides alternatives to avoid conscious thought on the subject. Murray Jay Siskind, a satirical postmodernist figure as a college professor, dispenses to Jack some advice for distracting himself from thoughts of mortality:

You could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out.  
This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality  
on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. (1985: 328)

Through Siskind, DeLillo highlights the previously discussed threat of disaster that inhabits technology, along with the way that developments in the field have led to a desire to avoid death, or discourage thought on the subject. A modern adaptation of Burke's theory of the sublime, DeLillo draws attention to what has been described as the 'technological sublime' (Mosco 2004: 22–23), and the way in which faith is placed in technology in contemporary society to abolish fears of death. Within 'In the Ruins of the Future,' DeLillo describes how technology has become 'our fate, our truth' (2001: 12), and technology is something that has to be trusted as a type of religious symbol. As Joseph Tabbi notes: 'The emergence of science and technology has put to flight former metaphysical, religious and political certainties' (1996: x), and technology has substituted religion in terms of 'faith,' producing feelings of 'awe and bewilderment' due to unexplainable events that take place (Behrooz and Pirnajmuddin 2016: 188). Siskind encourages Gladney to put this sublime faith into technology to dissolve his fears of death with the hope that this may destroy the perceived 'boundary,' 'border' and 'limit' to life and inspire immortality (1985: 328), despite its simultaneous capability of disaster. Here, DeLillo draws attention to the possibility for technology to produce a sense of immortality through the sublime, but it is not until later works that this is given feasibility and developed further.

It is the 'appetite for immortality' and the erasure of boundaries discussed in *White Noise* that Packer aspires to achieve in *Cosmopolis*. Living his entire life through the lens of technology, Packer wishes to complete his transformation from human to technology. For Packer, technology possesses the ability to produce a 'version of the future in which there is no death' (Laist 2010b: 180):

Humans and computers merge [...] And never-ending life begins [...] Why die when you can live on a disk? (DeLillo 2003a: 105)

As technology progressed in the years between the publication of *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo explored the ways in which technology offered a resolution to the fears experienced by Jack and Babette. Packer wishes to live his life 'on a disk,' becoming posthuman, existing as both 'bodily existence and computer simulation,

cybernetic mechanism and biological organism' (Hayles 1999: 3), neither a human nor a machine – an amalgamation of the two, located between the realms of humanity and technology (Pepperell 2003: 187). Packer wishes to find a solution to merging his physical being with technology, with no 'essential differences or demarcations' between them (Hayles 1999: 3). For Packer, technology has 'change[d] the nature of death' (Laist 2010a: 268) after seeing a man killed 'live on the Money Channel' (2003a: 33), yet still existing in the realm of televisual virtuality. Packer perceives a sense of immortality inflicted upon the man that had been killed through the playing and replaying of this event and technology becomes the means by which to pursue this immortality. Once more, the disastrous event is only comprehended by Packer when witnessed through technology.

Despite his aspirations, Packer eventually realises he cannot achieve his goal. Packer frequently uses watches and screens that display his future self, and actions that he has not yet performed in reality: 'He realized queerly that he'd just placed his thumb on his chinline, a second or two after he'd seen it on-screen' (2003a: 22). Packer transcends the physical world not only through the integration with technology, but also through the transcendence of time (2003a: 216). He no longer abides by linear time, and technology exists one step ahead of his physical being. Boxall suggests that cyber-capital and the rapid expansion of technology represented by DeLillo have led to a 'new theory of time' (2006: 216). Here, DeLillo also displays a separation of the real from the virtual, where his physical future is his virtual present, and the physical present is also his virtual past. Equally, in 'In the Ruins of the Future,' DeLillo expresses that '[t]he dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future' (2001: 12). This is in fact how DeLillo depicts Packer, living in the future as a result of his technology and this addiction, whilst his splintered physical self lags behind. DeLillo identifies the 'Dow' and American cyber-capital as one of the culprits of this obsession, the very method that Packer uses to attain his status and fortune. Packer is so thoroughly embedded in the hyperreal, that he abandons all material reality and the physical constraints this entails. Additionally, DeLillo has asserted how modern developments

in technology have created a desire for 'time itself to move faster' (1997: 61). Packer's ability to surpass time through the use of technology is evidence of the development in DeLillo's meditation on the subject, and how it is this deconstruction of time that paves the way for the possibilities of immortality.

Upon the confrontation with his assassin, Levin, Packer experiences a similar episode: 'He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound' (2003a: 209). The moment expresses both the shortcomings and successes of Packer's quest for immortality. Packer 'exist[s] on the border of mortality and immortality,' simultaneously alive and dead (Koikawa 2012: 52). On the one hand, he manages to surpass his physical being 'through technological mediation' (Laist 2010a: 272), and on the other, Packer is once more 'displaced by the very technologies he claims to master' (Veggian 2015: 90). Technology has, in fact, lured him into his own forthcoming death, the antithesis of his original aspirations. Once more DeLillo's notion of technology having 'a kind of will' and drive of its own consciousness (DeLillo 2003b) comes to fruition. Although Packer finds devices to be 'vestigial' and 'degenerate' (2003a: 19), he fails to understand that he himself carries the same traits, and is rendered obsolete at the hands of technology that dictates his existence, rendering him as a powerless victim. Packer is, in the words of Kinski, 'Out of control [...] Driven by thinking machines that we have no final authority over' (2003a: 85). Despite Packer believing that he holds the power with regard to his relationship with technology, this is in fact the opposite of the truth. Packer 'embrace[d] the illusion' (Koikawa 2012: 6) that 'when he died he would not end. The world would end,' as a result of his belief that immortality can be gained through cyberspace. He feels he has the power to manipulate technology, despite it actually manipulating him and being the causal factor for his impending self-destruction. This again recalls DeLillo's idea that technology has 'a kind of will, a drive toward being realized ... Is technology also one of the things that is driving us?' (DeLillo 2003b).

*Valparaiso*, DeLillo's 1999 play, places the central protagonist in a similar situation. Through the media-circus effects of his mistaken trip to Valparaiso, Chile, Majeski abolishes his personal life and history to form his identity around his media



representation and the interviews that he gives (Rossini 2016: 55), quitting his job and devoting his time to the identity that is created for him through television. Majeski is said to only be 'really deeply there' and 'exceptional' (1999: 85) when he is on television, and without this representation, he has no real existence as he relies upon these to attain a purpose. Equally, Majeski's suicide, performed by strangling himself with a microphone live on a talk-show, is an act immortalised through the replaying of the event, one that is consumable to viewers, representing asphyxiation as a media commodity in postmodern society. The talk-show host Delfina Treadwell previously explained how she was both 'everywhere' and 'nowhere' simultaneously, attaining a sense of immortality through technology and her televised representation.

Throughout DeLillo's oeuvre, according to Boxall, death is frequently found 'inhabiting those very technologies that promise to eradicate death' (2006: 10), echoing Siskind's ideas in *White Noise* of technology providing both 'appetite for immortality' and 'extinction' (1985: 328) simultaneously. After exploring the subject of immortality within *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo produces a reversal of thought in *Zero K*. At face value, the Convergence appears to offer characters a chance to experience an extension of life, and the avoidance of mortality through 'stretch[ing] the boundaries of what it means to be human' (2016: 71), once more touching upon posthuman themes whereby characters are fused with technology to avoid death. With technology progressing rapidly in the 13 years after the publication of *Cosmopolis*, and three decades after *White Noise*, it seems the only discovery left for technology to uncover is the prolonging of life or the prohibiting of death. Arriving at the Convergence dying of Multiple Sclerosis, Artis Martineau is to be cryogenically frozen for the possibility that, in the future, a cure will be found for her disease. The process is referred to as 'faith-based technology [...] Another god' (2016: 9) by Ross Lockhart, Artis' husband and father of narrator, Jeffrey Lockhart. This once again displays notions of the technological sublime, where technology becomes the source for belief and faith without the need for justification, replacing religion within contemporary society in abolishing fears (Tabbi 1996: x). Similarly, Artis hopes to wake into 'a deeper and truer reality. Lines of brilliant light, every material thing in its fullness, a holy object'

(DeLillo 2016: 47), depicting an Elysium or heavenly setting, once more providing evidence for the Convergence as technological sublime, and a replacement for religious belief. In DeLillo's novel, technology replaces religion as the new faith, and it is technology that holds the possibility of immortality and emancipation, as the Convergence 'simply renews and extends those swarming traditions of everlasting life' (2016: 64).

However, shortly before Artis' encapsulation, Ross explains that he is 'going with her' (2016: 110) to be frozen, despite having no physical reason or justification to do so. Ross is to be inducted into the Zero K special unit, designed for those who wish 'to make a certain kind of transition to the next level' (2016: 112), stating that he is 'ending one version of [his] life to enter another and far more permanent version' (2016: 111). Through 'ending' part of his life, however, it can be said that Ross in fact seeks death and has given up on his desire to live, possessing a fear of being left behind in life when others, such as Artis, pass on without him. Ross seeks to become an escapee from a world that is troubled with disaster. He initially changes his mind about following Artis, before changing it back once more, deciding to finally be frozen. This hesitancy that he exhibits is evidence of an acute struggle to find a sense of belonging. As humans remain inherently social beings, time is running out for Ross to find his sense of belonging, and decides that he will only achieve this by following his wife, regardless of whether or not this means life or death. Similarly, before being frozen, Artis ponders whether she can 'stop being who [she is] and become no one' (2016: 160), desiring for technology to be an instrument to end her life, rather than extend it.

Throughout *Zero K*, screens displaying apocalyptic events drop down into the Convergence, depicting the inevitability of the destruction of the world, providing compelling visual assaults for those inducted into the Convergence. A monk, who ministers to those who are to be frozen, efficiently summarises DeLillo's key statement in the novel as he asks 'Don't you want to die?' (2016: 40) with a keen interest, succinctly polarising the thematic fear running through *White Noise*: 'Who will die first?' (1985: 17). Away from the surface aspiration and desire for immortality, the

Convergence makes a compelling case for avoiding life through cryonics. The name of the compound, 'the Convergence' is indicative of a coming together, a clashing of life and death, technology and humanity, where it is no longer possible to distinguish the differences clearly. The Convergence ultimately reveals itself to be an escape from the world, disguised as a quest for immortality. DeLillo constantly traverses the border between life and death in *Zero K*, and withholds from clearly depicting the intentions of the narrative. The cryonic pods, initially described as preserving life, in actual fact resemble coffins that symbolise death, providing a gateway for people to escape from the world rather than extending their stay in it. Despite Artis believing that she is to 'die a while, then live forever' (2016: 114), people actually arrive at the Convergence 'to die... [t]his is their operational role' (2016: 96), once more providing conflicting views as to what the Convergence represents. DeLillo depicts a world that has lost control, one that is full of disaster and danger that perhaps an individual would rather miss than withstand. In *Zero K*, true solace lies within death. Instead of crafting a concretised perspective, DeLillo provides no obvious answers to the questions that arise in the novel. Instead, the narrative produces more questions, as the Stenmark twins (artificially named by Jeffrey) deliberate in the novel, 'Isn't death a blessing? Doesn't it define the value of our lives?' (2016: 66). This remark is representative of the key questions that DeLillo's narrative encourages the reader to deliberate through the course of the novel.

## Changing Channels II

Starting with the Gladneys' fear of death in *White Noise*, technology was deployed by DeLillo to represent an avoidance of thoughts on the subject. Developing through the later work of *Cosmopolis*, Packer attempts to eradicate death by combining himself with the technology that has been so influential in his life, becoming an immortal posthuman figure. As Packer attempts to surpass himself and the concept of time, he ultimately finds himself incapable of doing so, and technology in fact becomes responsible for the unravelling of his life. *Zero K* seems to offer the total resolution to fears of death, similar to those experienced by the Gladneys. However, in the contemporary moment, with our reliance on technology and the changes to our global

climate, it is in fact an escape from life that the Convergence offers those attracted to it. The bleakness of *Zero K* and the process of humanity running away from itself give a clear sense of ending for both DeLillo's writing, now in his eighties, and his vision of humanity. The thoughts of Gladney and the will of Packer point towards a questioning, in DeLillo's fiction, of whether or not immortality, and the direction in which technology is developing is an entirely good concept. Without death, there cannot be a real value to life, and the narrative in *Zero K* provides a culmination of DeLillo's meditations on death. Jonathan Dollimore states that 'ultimate freedom lies in death' (2001: 173) and the further humanity progresses with the aid of technology, the closer we come to realise that 'the truth of life comes realized in our perishing individuality' (2001: 178). Despite the three decades that lie between the publication of these three novels, DeLillo remains consistent in his concerns regarding the complex nature of the relationship between technology and our mortality, though the direction of his concerns has changed over time. As Siskind summarises in *White Noise*, technology inspires both 'immortality' and 'extinction' simultaneously (1985: 328). This concept is effectively portrayed in *Zero K* through the convergence of both themes, and the sense of indecision displayed by characters who desire neither life nor death.

Despite this philosophical reversal, similarities concerning the theme of mortality can be observed between *Zero K* and *White Noise*. Ross's decision to follow his wife's journey into the cryonic pods can be said to mirror the anxieties surrounding Jack and Babette. Putting aside the differences in their aspirations, the one fear they all share in common is loneliness, and being left behind in an empty world. Jack and Babette both wish to die first despite their fear of death, and Ross decides to end one version of his life, despite an underlying quest for immortality.

Siskind meditates here on the invention of technology in *White Noise*:

It's what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies. But it's also life, isn't it? It prolongs life [...] Give yourself up to it, Jack. Believe in it. They'll insert you in a gleaming tube, irradiate your body with the basic stuff of the universe. Light, energy, dreams. God's own goodness. (1985: 328)

The passage above resonates uncannily with the narrative of *Zero K*, that also depicts people being inserted into a 'gleaming tube' in the hope of 'prolong[ing] life' away from the secrets of 'decaying bodies.' Jack in *White Noise* is persuaded to 'believe' in technology which is 'God's own goodness,' once more depicting technology as a new form of religion that should be submitted to as it gives faith for abolishing fears, particularly those fears surrounding mortality. However, DeLillo demonstrates a reversal of the themes previously displayed in *White Noise*, as Ross harbours a fear of life, rather than death. The gleaming tubes are no longer there to preserve life, but are there to end it. The impending disaster that inherently exists within technology appears to have left its creators powerless, yearning for an escape from the world. Jeffrey describes cryonics to be 'visionary art' in *Zero K* (2016: 23). This seems to provide a fitting description of DeLillo's oeuvre, one that is a long-standing meditation on the relationship between disaster, mortality and technology. Technology escorts people away from life in the near future of *Zero K*, but for now it is one of the things that is 'driving us' onwards in prolonging life (DeLillo 2003b), as it is no longer 'crouched and undecidable' (2003a: 95).

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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