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THE BILLIONAIRES' ROAD TO DISAPPEARANCE IN DON DELILLO'S NOVELS COSMOPOLIS AND ZERO K

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Abstract: *This paper deals with a later theme in Don DeLillo's fiction, which can be summed up as the wealthy American financier's passage: these characters' evolution presented in the two novels mentioned above can be approximately compared to the Gaussian bell curve. Using Karl Jaspers's existentialist terms, we may state that, if the two main characters, Eric Packer (Cosmopolis), and Ross Lockhart (Zero K), appear in the beginning as sheer empirical beings, locked in their Dasein and unable to reach genuine communication with their fellows, they are more or less suddenly faced with a "boundary situation" that will force them to take a huge leap towards Existenz (the German philosopher's word for authentic being) and give up the mere factuality of their lives.*

The ways in which the two tycoons do it are, though, quite different. Eric Packer was in the beginning apparently engaged in what Zygmunt Bauman considers to be a typically postmodern "life strategy": the deconstruction of immortality, which is meant to carry away the fear of death; afterwards, pushed on by an irresistible death drive, he will choose gradual self-destruction. On the contrary, Ross Lockhart, his later embodiment, lets himself be driven by a will to rebirth, and finds an outlet in the hope offered by his own futuristic cryonics project.

In a previous paper,^A where I was commenting on DeLillo's first 'billionaire novel', *Cosmopolis*, the main point consisted in a demonstration that at the outset the protagonist, an obscenely rich New-Yorker, perfectly illustrates the futile fight against the sense of death by applying the strategy of *deconstructing immortality*. (Zygmunt Bauman is the sociologist who in this respect has defined two related 'life strategies'— a modern and a postmodern one, which resort to deconstructing mortality and immortality, respectively.)

I was arguing then that Eric Packer, the ruthless currency speculator, does nothing at the beginning of his final day but unconsciously attempt to "[decompose eternity] into a Brownian movement of passing moments" (Bauman 170), as he watches the never-stopping digits of the global capital flow on the screens in his stretch limousine carrying him across the 'world city', or as he treats any new high-tech gadget as if it were a piece of junk, right after he has bought it. However, Eric's luxury trip across New York will begin to turn bad before long, and in the course of the day he will suffer a staggering social and existential collapse—an evolution that involves other psychological forces at work deep inside him.

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^A "(Im)Mortality in Don DeLillo's 'World City'", published in 2009 (see Works Cited).

Hardly could I have guessed when I wrote the above-mentioned paper that DeLillo would come back to the death-of-billionaire theme and reverse it in a way which at the same time completes and partially contradicts the astonishing resolution in *Cosmopolis*.

Indeed, after the American author made a detour through the 9/11 aftermath (*Falling Man*, 2007), and the condensed world of a former government advisor, retired deep in the desert (*Point Omega*, 2010), a new DeLillo novel, *Zero K*, came out in 2016, in which another American financial tycoon, Ross Lockhart, holds a prominent place, as the most important contributor to a growing project of cryopreservation for human bodies, located in an unnamed -stan country of Central Asia.

Establishing correspondences between the protagonists of *Cosmopolis* and *Zero K* will help us to delineate a map of the imaginary that characterises DeLillo's view on a particular sector of the contemporary American world, with its obsessions and predicaments.

At the incipit of both stories, Eric and Ross are two very similar (though not identical) characters—members of the closed circle of hyper-opulent men, "shaped by money" (DeLillo, *Zero K* 2), and possessed of an enormous economic, social and symbolic capital (in Bourdieu's terms). The protagonist of *Cosmopolis* is metaphorically associated in the reader's mind either with a (financial) rat, or with a shark (actually he enjoys the sight of such a predator in a special tank in his 48-room apartment), or finally with the "scavenger's ravenous heart" of the gulls flying outside, over the river. Ross Lockhart, of *Zero K*, appears as a more mellowed version of his younger predecessor, and his interest has begun to turn from investments and mere money making to high culture—collecting paintings, browsing rare books—and to futuristic technological projects. Eric Packer is a connoisseur in poetry and painting, too, but his cynical, sharklike behaviour has been prevailing so far; it is hard for him to remember how many people he has crushed or has considered as mere wallpaper. His mode of communication is egocentric *par excellence*, and, as Karl Jaspers would put it, "in Kantian terms, persons are treated [by such men] only as means to an end, and not as an end in itself" (Salamun 18). Having a sadomasochistic nature, Eric enjoys both destroying his fellow people and being subjected to torture, as for instance when he is "whipped" by the stun gun of his bodyguard and sex partner:

Stun me, I mean it. Draw the gun and shoot. I want you to do it, Kendra. Show me what it feels like. . . . Show me something I don't know. Stun me to my DNA. . . . I want all the volts the weapon holds. Do it. Shoot it. Now (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 114-15).

Afterwards he feels jellified, electroconvulsive on the hotel rug, and *strangely elated, deprived of his faculties of reason* (my emphasis).

Eric leads a social life of excess (he has even acquired a former strategic bomber, made in USSR, and boasts that it is *his own*), and, consequently, according to Benno (a kind of revenge angel for him), he must die both "for how much he had, and for how much he lost" (202).

Yet, it is not only for ethical reasons that he has to turn to exit, but also because of a new drive that little by little takes possession of this toughest man of power, during his ill-boding journey through the city.

Boundary situations and *Existenz*, in Karl Jaspers's view

More often than not people's life is steeped into trivial events and actions, which makes them typical *Dasein*^B individuals, victims of the shock caused by the unexpectedness and irrational nature of what Karl Jaspers calls 'boundary situations' (*Grenzsituationen*). As he argues in his "Introduction to Philosophy" (*Einführung in die Philosophie*), our human condition faces us not only with changing events and opportunities, but also with situations that stay unaltered in their essence, as for instance "the awareness of having to die one day, to suffer, to fight, to experience the contingent, or to be inextricably entangled in a sense of guilt" (Jaspers 1986, 8). We can neither overcome, nor change these situations, though we often try to elude them, as if they simply did not exist. If one does not attempt to blur such conditions, then, through a process of despair and personal re-creation, one may become *oneself*, "through a change in the consciousness of his own being" (8). In other words, our sense of the world's fundamentals and values suddenly collapses in such circumstances, solitude prevails, and only later on can the individual approach his very being and attain genuine communication, by deeply experiencing failure, without any attempt to shun it.^C This means that the individual has to take an existential leap (*existentielle Aufschwung*) in order to reach an authentic being (*die Existenz*), which is marked by a deep spiritual and moral experience described by Jaspers as a "clash enlivened by love" (*der liebende Kampf*).^D

One cannot exist but together with the other, Jaspers insists; "alone, I am nothing" (13). And to be together with an other means to communicate, not from intellect to intellect, but from *Existence* to *Existence* (*die Existenz*), when "impersonal meanings and values are used only as bridges" (not in themselves). It is only within the framework of such communication that I can live fully, not only factually (13). Echoes of these views can be seen later on in the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, who insisted on the crucial nature of our responsibility towards the other, and, respectively, on the fact that our individual identity is closely bound with the identity of the other people.

Plummeting down the abyss towards existential communication

The two tycoon figures created by Don DeLillo appear to be in the beginning the most matter-of-fact, insensitive people, doubt-proof, sharply determined

^B This concept used by Jaspers is akin to Heidegger's notion but not more than that. For Jaspers, *Dasein* "signifies man's factual being, which is not accomplished existentially". Nonetheless, it is crucial for any individual, who would not be able to reach an authentic being without this framework (see Purdea, George, Note 3, in Jaspers, Karl. *Texte filosofice*, p. 360).

^C See Purdea, George, Note 4, in Jaspers, K., *Texte filosofice*, p. 361.

^D Ibidem, Note 7, p. 362.

businessmen, for whom being alive means acting quickly, ruthlessly, and having a 'locked heart'. From a Jaspersian perspective, they are sheer empirical beings, locked in their *Dasein*, who have not yet overcome the factuality of their experience or reached genuine communication with their fellows.

Indeed, Ross, another kind of Eric, has a similar past to share with the latter, and his formerly abandoned son throws it in his face during a hot argument:

"Tell me this. Have you committed crimes?"

"Crimes."

"Enormous frauds. Doesn't this happen all the time in your line of work? Investors get swindled. What else? Enormous sums of money get transferred illegally. What else? I don't know". (DeLillo, *Zeo K* 112)

Yet, Jeffrey does know what he himself means, thinking of "all the acquisitions, all the wealth [his father had] managed for others and accumulated for himself, the master market strategist, owner of art collections and island retreats and super-midsize jets" (111).

The past notwithstanding, there comes in both Eric's and Ross' life a moment of rupture (no matter what differences there are between them), when they begin to take a huge leap toward another fixed point.

With Eric Packer it all starts one morning, when an idea crosses his mind—to go and have a haircut in a remote, old district of New York—and he insists on it, despite the credible threats on the route that are mentioned by his security agents. This trip becomes a compulsive need to go back towards his origins—his childhood, the old tenement block in a district where he used to go to the same barber together with his father. And all this should be due to a feeling of doubt that is by now slipping into his mind, similar to the sense of *uncertainty* caused by the surrounding world and evoked by Jaspers: the only things which remain trustworthy in such a case, the German philosopher says, are "the mother land and the birth place landscapes, the parents and forefathers, the siblings, friends, or our life partner," together with traditions, faith, works of art (Jaspers, *Texte filosofice* 9).

Soon after that morning's initial moments and the departure from his humongous building, Packer's life takes on a plummeting trajectory: this smartest speculator begins to lose money "by the ton", playing against the rising yen. He is doing it despite his advisors' warnings, except for Vija Kinski, his 'chief of theory', who (diabolically?) urges him, with a coarse laugh, to carry on, because "[t]o pull back now would not be authentic" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 85); the reference to authenticity clearly reveals the existentialist, Jaspersian vein in this boundary situation. The medical check-up in a limo, the casual sex affairs in nearby hotels, the two chance meetings with his recent wife do not deter the protagonist from risking more and more money, including his wife's fortune, until a global financial quake starts to build, which gives him a lot of thrill. Forebodings of disaster are not missing during the crosstown ride, such as a man's self-immolation in the street, the anti-capitalist protesters loosing battalions of rats in hotel lobbies and restaurants, and later on vandalising Eric's immaculate limousine. Also, there is Kinski's prediction: "Later

today perhaps. Maybe today is the day when everything happens, for better or worse, ka-boom, like that" (106).

In the climactic moment, when Eric's limo encounters the funeral of his favourite rap star, this formerly tough man breaks down, weeping violently for the singer and for himself, enveloped in the arms of a common friend, where he feels "the beginnings of thoughtful acceptance" (139). In Jasper's view, this would be a moment of existential communication, when a person, an interlocutor becomes an end in itself and when one reaches the "non-objective actuality of selfbeing" (Salamun 7).

Eric is now guided by a death drive, by a prevailing sense of "surpassing stillness, a fatedness that [feels] disinterested and *free*" (136)—free in an existentialist sense, we may say—, and acts correspondingly, leaving the barber's suddenly with only one side haircut done, asking the driver to cut off the contact with the base, like a suicidal pilot, or as his foil, Benno Levin, will say later, "engineering [his own] downfall" (190). His final attempt to find a last-minute reprieve solution, by shooting and mutilating himself, cannot stop the doomful course of events. The face-to-face encounter (in Levinas's words) with Benno (his former victim, his stalker and his executioner) will prove to be for Eric an illuminating experience that will help him accept his fate.

The boundary situation has come to a close and Eric Packer is only history even before the moment of his demise. In an image of surrealistic irony, he can see in the last seconds, on the screen of his smart watch, his own body being tended by his lover.

In *Cosmopolis*, which is therefore to a certain extent an existentialist novel, the billionaire protagonist experiences a vague sense of guilt and certainly a decisive failure, which in the end enables him to delete the factuality of his former being and to find a road towards the Jaspersian *Existenz*, tragical though it may prove.

The will to rebirth

Ross Lockhart, from *Zero K*, is also confronted with a boundary situation, but he does not reach that kind of nihilistic despair which now and then marks the last hours of Packer's life. This cold, determined, successful man, has a soft spot—his deep affection for his second wife, Artis, an archeologist who has been afflicted by a severe neurological illness and is becoming more and more disabled. Together they have reached the conclusion that she should resort to cryopreservation, as a last, remote chance to be a full person again some time in future.

Yet, faced with this imminent loss, he seems unable to keep up his former determination and cool-headed behaviour, and, just for sharing his grief with someone related to him, arranges for his son by his first wife, to come to the place where the preparations for Artis's departure are in progress.

A short time after Jeffrey's arrival, on the eve of Artis's planned passage, his father tells him that he has changed his mind: he will be going with her to the very end—not just monitor the proceedings, he will "join her, sharing it, side by side," says he, and the son senses a tinge of helplessness in his words (DeLillo, *Zero K* 111). Seemingly she approves of his decision, though she has not put it in words.

Ross' moral crisis is not quite so piercing as Eric's and is not supposed to lead directly to the protagonist's demise; actually his former Nietzschean will to power is not curbed by a Freudian self-destruction impulse (as in Eric's case), but at this moment is replaced by a *will to rebirth*, for he seems to strongly believe in the final success of his extreme technological project.

The Convergence

The starting point of this undertaking is the cryonics movement.^E In DeLillo's story with a tinge of science fiction, enormous sums of money have been invested in the 'Convergence' project by an unspecified number of contributors (including secret organisations); an army of specialists, from social theorists to psychologists and ethicists, from biologists to geneticists, neuroscientists, futurists, and climatologists have been brought together to work there. Some of these sages remind us of Packer's staff, particularly of his 'chief of theory'. Other experts are at work to design an advanced language that is fit for the objectives of the programme and is expanded so as to cover the new stretches of future thought. It is Ross' hope that the current site will be once the center of a new metropolis.

The building complex set in the middle of the Kazakh steppe, "among those Precambrian rocks" (20), is an amazing labyrinthine structure that has developed mostly underground, replete with monotonous halls and doors on the windowless ground floor; in its muteness, Jeffrey, as a guest, tries to "inject meaning" (10), but to little avail. Though Jeffrey is the owner's son, his access to most levels is restricted during his first visit by a flat disk attached to a wristband, and it is with great difficulty that he, the story's narrator, manages to draw some information about this puzzle from his father and a few people who care to sparingly answer his queries. Little by little he will visit and understand the role of several sectors of the Convergence compound, such as the artificial garden (a typical representation of a postmodern Baudrillardian simulacrum), the hospice (where the dying are tended before the freezing procedures), or the mobile screen on one hall where terrifying, catastrophic videos are projected for Jeffrey's sole use apparently.

Don DeLillo's ingenuity works wonders in this novel, and I am not referring only to startling dialogues and thoughts, but also to technological inventiveness. Sometimes the hardly possible intermingles with the uncanny, as in the case of the video that eerily shows Jeffrey the violent death by gunfire of a related Ukrainian teenager, engaged in his country in a sectarian fight which ends badly: no one would have known in the Convergence about his existence. This magical event reminds the

^E The cryopreservation procedures were initiated in the 1960's by Robert C. W. Ettinger, a physics professor at Wayne State University, Detroit, who promoted the freezing of humans that have just been pronounced dead, with the aim of their been resuscitated some time in the far future, when biotechnology has made enough progress to ensure the success of the challenging procedures. Though there are a couple of institutes in the U.S.A. and one in Russia where all this is implemented and about 250 human bodies already cryopreserved, this practice is still extremely controversial and considered to be on the edge of medicine from several perspectives (See *UK Cryonics* 1).

reader of Packer's smart watch, on which the latter sees his own posthumous 'experience'.

The name of the cryonics building implies a kind of human interaction that moves towards unity. On the other hand, geographically, existentially and morally the 'Convergence' suggests the separation from a common condition, or, in Michel Foucault's terms, a heterotopia of deviation, and, just like the desert in *Point Omega*, one of purification.

It is also a shrine to the most advanced technology, from vitrification^F to nanotechnology, which can ensure the promised future for its 'patients' in absolute safety, against any kind of catastrophic event. Artis is firmly convinced of that. Feeble though she is because of her multiple sclerosis, she has kept her sagacity unaltered and tells Jeffrey, who has come there to say his farewell, that parts of her body will be replaced and rebuilt, in a process of reassembling, atom by atom, and she will reawaken into a "deeper and truer reality" (47).

From a guide, Jeffrey learns that sometimes the heads with brains intact are removed from the patients' bodies and are kept separately, in order to be grafted to a nanobody in future. He thinks ironically that this means dying a human and then being reborn an isometric drone. Furthermore, within the braincase there is a phantom life, in the form of floating thoughts. So, it occurs to him to ask his father sarcastically about a possible sexual arousal down in the frozen people's capsules.

Against current bioethical principles (which stipulate that the procedures must begin only after legal death has been pronounced), in DeLillo's fictional world there is another category of people that are admitted in the Convergence for freezing procedures: those who are not suffering from a terminal illness and who may have a long span of life ahead of them. Here they are called 'heralds', are cared for in a special section, termed 'Zero K',^G and undergo a specific psychological preparation. Ross is also going to belong to this group.

Religious undertones are present, too, in the project: this is "faith-based technology," says Ross. It's another god, not quite so different from the earlier ones. And he adds, with some pride in his words: "Except that it's real, it's true, it delivers" (9).

Everything here is pure eschatology, in Jeffrey's opinion. Yet, he embodies the critical voices against the project: here rooms suggest an odd totalness, gardens are fabricated, food is unidentifiable, and the utilitarian seems to become totalitarian (see 147). For the young man, who feels a surge of anger rising in himself, the whole freezing procedure can only be characterised by "mass-delusion, by superstition and arrogance and self-deception" (50).

However, later on, when he has the permission to visit the awe-inspiring cryostorage section of the complex, he will admit that this is indeed a form of visionary

^F A special cryonics technique used during the cooling and solidification processes, which ensures that no ice crystals that could damage the tissues are formed in the frozen organs. Yet, at the current stage of research the agents used during the vitrification procedure are not without toxicity for human cells (See *UK Cryonics 1*).

^G "Zero K" means absolute zero, the lower limit of temperature. "K" derives from the name of the physicist William Thomson, Baron Kelvin (1824-1907).

art, body art, having broad implications, or, thinking of Artis's profession, it may be interpreted as archaeology for a future age (see 256).

Surrogate death and ensuing rebirth

Matters of life/death/rebirth are being discussed consistently in that institution throughout the story, mostly tackled by the psychologists, ethicists and other "vital minds" during their encounters with the patients, with the "heralds", or with the sponsors and patrons. There is a kind of religious self-assurance in the speakers' words. This new form of eschatology promotes "a consciousness that blends with the environment" (64). The Convergence experts assure their listeners that "in future, death will become unacceptable," though the life of our planet may be more fragile; therefore, the latter "will emerge in cyberhuman form into a new kind of universe" (65-66). In a mode that is typical for later DeLilloan fiction, difficult queries are raised during such philosophical dialogues, involving the necessary nature of death (Does it not define our lives? Doesn't immortality destroy art and culture? What will poets write about? What ultimate truth will remain? and so forth). (See 69-70.) Then optimistic counter-arguments are put forward by two men, probably twins, in a kind of frenzied plea for the technological miracles to come:

We have remade this wasteland in order to separate ourselves from reasonableness . . . We will refresh the organs [of the cryogenic dead], regenerate their systems . . . Nano-units implanted in the suitable receptors of the brain. Russian novels, the films of Bergman, Kubrick, Kurosawa, Tarkovsky. In the capsule you dream of old lovers and listen to Bach, to Billie Holiday . . . (72)

Jeffrey—the only active sceptical mind attending these enthusiastic cryonics seminars—then understands that the whole design of the complex, including its tone and flow, is mostly the work of these twin brothers (nicknamed the Stenmarks by him), who to his mind are adventurers of a kind difficult to define, "bland in appearance, demonologists in spirit." Although they admit that death is "a tough habit to break" (73), these men attempt to relegate it to sociology, defining demise as a "cultural artifact, not a strict determination of what is humanly inevitable" (71).

For Ross, it is loaded with hope, though. Faced with what for him appears as a boundary situation, caused by the inevitable loss of Artis, he is ready to "take the existential leap" (as the twins say, in a Jaspersian vein) and to join her on the way to a surrogate death followed by rebirth. "I don't want to lead the life I'll be leading without her" (110), he admits, talking to Jeffrey, and afterwards insists, "One dies, the other has to die" (112), dismissing Jeffrey's common sense rejoinders.

Then, possibly under the influence of his argument with his son, he changes his mind abruptly, putting off "the billionaire's dream of immortality" (also the Stenmarks' phrase). (117) Could this after-thought be also due to a recent doubt about the ultimate success of his technological venture? We shall never learn the truth, it remains a matter of conjecture.

After a two years' interval, the father and the son are back to the Convergence complex. For Ross the boundary situation is back, too, more intensely. When Jeffrey

met his father in New York, two or three times, he noticed his ever growing decline. The characterising word for the latter was now *desuetude*, the son said to himself; by way of parentheses, Jeffrey is unusually fond of words (which have a powerful identitary function for him), fond of naming and defining people and situations.^H

Ross looks ruined, having lost his craft and his former relentless attitude which described him. He resembles Eric Packer in this respect, whose physical decay, even body smell in his last hours were prevalent. Yet, the causes of their deterioration are not the same. With Ross there is a decline in his existential status only, not also in his social one, which stays the same to the end.

A 'vital mind' of the Convergence explains to Jeffrey that Ross' life was reduced to near shreds by the loss of Artis. The difficult pledge he made two years ago that from then on he *had* to carry the loss, the absence of his life partner, proved impossible to fulfil. His "existential communication" has been cut off, we understand: "Alone, I am nothing," he probably thinks, in Jaspers's words.

On the way to cryonic stillness, Ross will go through a complicated series of procedures, some of them being witnessed by his son. He will be one of the heralds, who experience it all at their own decision, though not pressed by incurable diseases. First he is given a kind of ritual haircut and shave, which transforms him into just a part of the human being Jeffrey knew: "The shaved face was a sad story, eyes blank, flesh caved beneath the stark cheekbones, jaw turned to mush" (233). Nothing is left to him except for the clothing he is still wearing. The unknown language the barber and the other witness are speaking there is but one more element of a compressed ceremony. And Eric Packer's half haircut in *Cosmopolis* appears to be nothing but a counterpart protocol on the road to disappearance.

In a boardroom people are seated, waiting for the psychological preparation session. A tall, somber woman addresses the 'heralds', those who have chosen "to enter the portal prematurely" (238). She is the one in charge of reassuring the future patients. The other speaker, one of the two Stenmarks, plays a different role: in a state of near seizure, he draws a catastrophic future image of the Earth dominated by war and terror, with cities reduced to rubble streets, hand-to-hand combat and old-style weapons, with the absence of petrol, food and water: "Men in jungle packs. Crush the innocent, burn the huts and poison the wells. Relive the history of the bloodline" (241). Post-urban terrorists kill those who belong to the other caliphate. All around small homemade explosives. War is inescapable: "Isn't war the only ripple on the dim surface of human affairs"? the man says (242), after an extended cinematographic portrayal of apocalypse in a Cormac McCarthy-like vision. Otherwise, it should be noted that this is no news: Heraclitus told people long ago that war is the father of us all, the King of all.

The patients look impressed, as Jeffrey sees them. Their faces are shining with anticipation and near joy. The new faith has made its way into their minds: a bald woman, seated near Ross, seems "eager to slip out of this life into timeless repose, leaving behind all the shaky complications of body, mind and personal circumstance" (244).

^H This is a DeLilloan mark, moreover. One of his earlier novels is titled *The Names*.

The next time Jeffrey sees Ross, his father lies naked on a slab, without a hair on his body. It is now just "a thing fallen into anonymity", yet who manages to mumble a few words, related to fine arts, his hobby: "*Gesso on linen*" (251). It is the last splinter of communication with this world. In a short time his body will be prepared and then they will submit it to the cooldown process; placed into a capsule, Ross will join Artis in a special chamber for the two of them.

In that enormous storage section, the deepest and the most secret of the whole complex, the bodies are *regal* in their cryonic bearing, as DeLillo tells us through his narrator's voice, and then we remember that Eric Packer, too, in one of his last moments' visions, saw his own body being ceremonially embalmed by his bodyguard and lover, as in "some mortuary temple buried in sand for four thousand years, with dog-headed gods in attendance" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 208).

The futuristic vision of this highly technologised, postmodern Hades, holding the kingly frozen bodies, is complemented in DeLillo's latest novel with a final epiphany of the same person, Jeffrey, the man with the most sensitive and insightful mind in the story: during a bus ride through New York, he witnesses the majestic brightness of the sun's rays that for a while align with the street grid of the city. The awe-inspired, exhilarating cries of wonder given out by a child on the same bus appear to Jeffrey as some prelinguistic grunts that accompany the "intimate touch of earth and sun," and they are much more expressive than words (274). For the young man, this is a moment of pure *Existenz*, triggered by the boy's genuine communication with the world wonders.

A topos in DeLillo's imaginary, "brilliantly beautiful sunsets" are moreover also present in a powerful scene in his earlier novel, *White Noise*, where they have a supplementary cause in a catastrophic airborne toxic event, which causes the "postmodern" skylines to be even more dazzling, and also "tinged with dread" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 170).

It should be noted here that what makes the stories in both *Cosmopolis* and *Zero K* stand at the frontier between the real and the uncanny is the presence of truly magical elements, mostly connected with the imminence of death—such as the wrist watch anticipatory image in the former and the Ukraine fight scene in the latter novel.

To conclude, we may paraphrase one of the Stenmarks' words, saying that *immortality* is a tough habit to break, no matter if one, according to Bauman's view, attempts to deconstruct it in the postmodern manner, like the early Eric Packer, or is engaged, like Ross Lockhart, in a modern 'life strategy', that is in fighting mortality straightforwardly, this time in a kind of science-fiction frame.

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¹ Gesso (2): "a paste prepared by mixing whiting with size or glue and spread upon a surface to fit it for painting or gilding" (Webster's 515).

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