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**LIMINAL ETHICS – THE DOCTRINE OF THE
MIDDLE WAY IN DON DELILLO’S *ZERO K*.**

Simon Pritchard

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THE GATEWAY PRESS
MADRID
2024

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THE TRELLIS PAPERS 15

THE GATEWAY PRESS 2024

Madrid, Spain

ISSN: 1886-8223

Depósito legal: M-31364-2006

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Introduction.

Jeff Lockhart, the Hamletian narrator of Don DeLillo's penultimate novel *Zero K*, makes several references to his own inability to find an appropriate response to his environment and to the events that occur around him: "I didn't know how to respond...", he states early on in the novel, "... it was outside my range" (47), then, later, "... I didn't know what to do, or say, or where to go" (101), and, finally, "... I wanted to see and feel what was here, even if I was unequal to the experience as it folded over me" (133). These, at first, sound like the typical remarks of a son that exists in the shadow of a man who has acquired great wealth and power, and Jeff's father, Ross, who has amassed a "network of companies, agencies, funds, trusts, foundations, syndicates, communes and clans" (7), is certainly this. However, Jeff's procrastination and expressions of helpless indecision are more than just the manifestations of an inferiority complex; rather, they are also entirely understandable, initial responses to the peculiar nature of the reality he inhabits. This is because the world of *Zero K* is one where, for a select few, death might be, perhaps indefinitely, postponed; where an underground group of "... social theorists ... biologists, and futurists, and geneticists, and climatologists, and neuroscientists, and psychologists" (33) have gathered to form the Convergence, a clandestine organization that specializes in the cryonic freezing of terminally ill, and in some cases perfectly healthy, people, so that their bodies might be stored until such a time that the technology exists to safely thaw and reanimate them and, thereby, "[r]ewrite the sad grim grieving playscript of death in the usual manner" (76). Jeff's stepmother, Artis, who is dying and has agreed to undergo the procedure, is staying at the Convergence's underground headquarters, located in northern Kyrgyzstan near the Russian border. During Jeff's already disorientating journey to see her and say farewell, he finds out that his father, who is in his

mid-to-late 60s, but in fine health, has decided that he is “[g]oing with her” (110). As Jeff accompanies Artis and his father on their visit to the Convergence’s compound, his momentary impotence and confusion are understandable, therefore, considering the jolt not only to his spatial, but also to his ethical and ontological, orientation, brought about by his being thrust into this new, posthuman reality.

This article will explore how the solutions to these challenges come to Jeff in the form of a choice between two extreme and equally unappealing options. For instance, his response to his father can be to live in his shadow, to conform to his will and accept the job offers he arranges for him, sign the trust fund he has set up for him, live his life like a rerun of his father’s, or he can rebel and, figuratively, iconoclastically smash the image of his father by rejecting his values and living a life entirely on his own terms. Jeff is faced with a similar choice in his response to the Convergence: to adhere to its strictures and embrace its vision of a deathless posthumanism, or to defy it and reject it as a travesty, as an affront to nature. In both cases, he, at first, seems to be attracted to the latter extreme, to the reaction befitting a rebellious youth. However, the novel sees Jeff strive for a more nuanced and ambivalent critique of the twin forces that hold him back, and, at the same, time propel him forwards; he aims for a reaction that is “within his range” and “equal” to his experiences. His response, therefore, takes the form of a “middle way” between the two extremes that are open to him. Jeff, in effect, takes a third option, one that incorporates elements of the two polar opposites without being one or the other; he charts a middle course between complete defiance and faithful adherence, attaining a position that is neither one nor the other. At the centre of this response to his father and to the posthuman future that the Convergence represents is Jeff’s discovery, towards the end of the novel, of the importance of community. This discovery provides the way forward for Jeff, between slavish obedience and outright rebellion.

1. Nagarjuna’s “Middle Way”: Between Reification and Nihilism

Central to the analysis of *Zero K* presented in this article is the doctrine of the Middle Way that originates in the work of the Buddhist philosopher Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563 – 483 BCE) and was taken up by his successor Nagarjuna (c. 150 – 250 CE). The work of the contemporary philosopher Jay Garfield, including his translation and commentary of Nagarjuna’s most seminal work *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, is indispensable to understanding the work of this ancient Buddhist philosopher. The following is an attempt to summarize, with the help of Garfield’s commentary, the main aspects of the Buddhist notion of the Middle Way.

Because this doctrine is central to the specific field of Buddhist ethics, a useful approach to understanding it is to consider it in relation to the history of Western ethics from which it

differs significantly. As Garfield explains, Western ethics has been, aside from certain exceptions, dominated by what he calls “output ethics”, that is the emphasis on acting, or failing to act, and the consequences that stem from this. In short, ethics, in the Western tradition of philosophy, has been centred on what individuals do and do not do. By contrast, Buddhist ethics is characterized as “input ethics” in that it is more related to the way we perceive the world: living a good life has more to do with our perception of the world than with the actions we take in that world. It is not that our actions are totally irrelevant, but simply that our perceptions are foregrounded as the guiding principles and primary motivations of our actions. Therefore, striving to live a more ethical life involves more the attainment of a perceptual shift than a change in the way we act. Buddhist philosophy, being very much concerned with the alleviation of human suffering and the pursuit of a more ethical life, is directed towards the attainment of this change in perception.

The recurring idea that accounts for why this change is so necessary, according to Buddhists, is the idea of suffering that stems from the primal confusion of attraction and aversion. The importance of this idea for Buddhist ethics is difficult to overstate. The root of human suffering lies in our confusion of how reality actually is; we perceive the world through the dual-lens of attraction to the things we want and aversion to the things we fear and wish to reject. For example, we are afraid of death, so we reject the possibility of life's finitude (we *avert* our gaze from the void of death), by clinging to the idea that our existence might extend beyond our bodies to an infinite afterlife (we are *attracted* to this improbable notion). According to all Buddhist schools of philosophy, this penchant for attraction and aversion is the root of human perceptual error and the cause of human suffering. Buddhist ethics claims that this suffering can, and ought to be, alleviated through the achievement of a perceptual shift that involves an escape from this trap of attraction and aversion.

The 5th century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna puts forward the idea of a path towards this perceptual shift and, in so doing, highlights a philosophical conundrum that has been confounding thinkers throughout the history of philosophy, both Eastern and Western. This is the problem of the mutually entailing ontologies of reification and nihilism. As Nagarjuna argues, the perceptual shift, so necessary for the alleviation of human suffering and for the living of an ethical life, requires the forging of a “Middle Way” between these opposing philosophies. He states that any individual who succumbs to either reification or nihilism, or both, cannot live an ethical life. The way out of this quandary, he claims, hinges on our ability to reach altered states of perception that might facilitate the untangling of this age-old philosophical double-bind. In order to explain how Nagarjuna does this, the two processes, reification and nihilism, must be first clearly defined.

Reification is the process of imbuing phenomena with an essential, independent and ultimate nature. The true reificationist imbues all phenomena with these qualities, but, by singling out a particularly illustrative example of something that is often reified, the process

of reification, and the meaning of these three key qualities, will be made clearer. The self, for instance, is something that has been reified since time immemorial; every individual instinctively participates in this process of reification. That is to say, we all feel ourselves to be, in some way, *essentially* who we are, we experience ourselves as individuals *independent* of other individuals and many of us consider the possibility that our self has an existence beyond the immanent here and now, that it somehow exists on an *ultimate* plane. This common sense understanding of the self (that it is essential, independent and ultimate) is the most commonly held reified notion. Nevertheless, from a Madhyamakan perspective, this perception of the self is a false perception and is the root cause for human suffering.¹ The alternative perception that Nagarjuna argues for, and that will be considered in detail presently, is offered as a remedy for human suffering and as a directive to live a more ethical life.

However, the practice of reification is pervasive and can affect human perception of all phenomena. To consider a more quotidian example – the everyday object that is used in countless philosophical thought experiments – will reveal the problems with the logic of this process. Firstly, in the eyes of the reificationist, a table also has an essential nature; there is the essence of “tableness” that any particular table possesses and this quality is somehow part of the table and yet, at the same time, separate to it. As Jay Garfield explains: “for a phenomenon to have an essence is for it to have some permanent independent core” (1995, p.111). The table itself might be demonstrably impermanent, it may be broken up, burnt, or otherwise destroyed, but, while it exists, it somehow has a “*permanent ... core*”. This leads to the second point: the reificationist will see the table as being completely independent of other phenomena. This means that the table does not rely on any other entities, like screws, joints and table legs, for its existence. This view of the table as independent requires the idea that the table somehow came into being fully formed. Finally, the table is seen to have an existence that is ultimate, which is to say that it exists on two ontological planes, the actual,

¹ It will be useful to place Nagarjuna's writing within the wider context of the vast field of Buddhist philosophy, of which it is just a part, if only to clarify that when referring to Nagarjuna and the school he established we are referring to one current within an enormously complex area of philosophical enquiry. Nagarjuna is the founder of the Madhyamika (translated as Middle Way) school of Mahayana Buddhism (Mahayana Buddhism itself being one of the three main traditions of Buddhism, Theravada and Vajrayana, being the other two). Therefore, Nagarjuna's treatise of the Middle Way exists as a branch of a branch of Buddhism. However, many of the arguments and ideas central to his treatise, (like emptiness, dependent arising, the Four Noble Truths, and so on) are concepts that are fundamental to Buddhist philosophy more broadly. While this article will use Nagarjuna's treatise of the Middle Way and such Buddhist notions as those listed above, it is important to make clear that the present work is not an attempt to make any contribution to the debates that continue to be had within Buddhist philosophy regarding the meaning and interpretation of canonical Buddhist texts. That job is being taken up by other, much more qualified, voices in the field. The current article will, while being aware of the enormity and complexity of Buddhist philosophical debate, make specific use of Nagarjuna's notion of the Middle Way for an interpretation of the ethics of Don DeLillo's fiction.

immanent plane where the everyday object can be used and knocked upon with the knuckles and a transcendental, ultimate plane where something like the Platonic forms of all phenomena (including all other substantial objects, along with abstract concepts and values) reside. Applying the ontological principles of reification to an ordinary object in this way should make clear the problems with the logic that underpins the process, but a Madhyamakan philosopher would make the argument that what pertains to tangible objects also pertains to human subjects. The process is no more or less logical whatever the phenomenon under consideration. According to Madhyamakan philosophy, to imbue a table with an essence makes just as much sense as it does to imbue a self with such essence; in short, the process of reification, whatever the object of such a process, is shown to be illogical and, therefore, untenable. However, one significant difference is that the practice of reifying the self has serious ethical implications, implications that will be explored presently. The only significant difference is that the practice of reifying the self has significant ethical implications, implications that will be explored presently.

It is now necessary to define the second term, nihilism, and show how Nagarjuna presents the relationship between this and reification. According to his account, the two ontologies are both equally unappealing and, yet, mutually entailing. He claims that these ontologies are unappealing, because they have negative ethical consequences. For instance, an ontology based on reification involves the placing of all phenomena on the pedestal of the transcendental plane, which, in turn, leads to the alienation of the individual from themselves, from others and from their environment. Also, an ontology based on nihilism involves the radically sceptical position of denying the existence of all phenomena, which leads to the same result: the alienation of the individual from all things. Nagarjuna makes the argument that reification and nihilism are mutually entailing in the following way: if, for instance, one accepts that the position of the reificationist is illogical and, therefore, untenable, a nihilistic position seems to naturally follow from this. If, for instance, one accepts that the position of the reificationist is illogical and, therefore, untenable, a nihilistic position seems to naturally follow from this. If we deny, for instance, that we have an essential, independent, or ultimate self, then it might seem that we are denying the very existence of any individual at all. Garfield speculates as to the reason for this nihilistic reaction when he writes: “[w]e are driven to reify ourselves, the objects in the world around us, and – in more abstract philosophical moods – theoretical constructs, values and so on because of an instinctual feeling that without an intrinsically real self, an intrinsically real world, and intrinsically real values, life has no real meaning and is utterly hopeless” (317). Nagarjuna claims that this sense of disillusionment is understandable, but it only occurs because one has begun by reifying phenomena. This is what Nagarjuna means when he argues that reification and nihilism are mutually entailing: if you start with one, then you end up with the other; if you reify phenomena, then you set yourself up for the disillusionment felt when this process of reification is shown to be mistaken and a position of nihilism then follows. However, this lurching from one position (reification) to the other (nihilism) is the result of a false

dichotomy: either the self exists as the kind of reified self that individuals unreflectively sense is theirs (with its quality of being essential, independent and ultimate), or the self does not exist at all and human beings are merely bio-chemical automata, with any sense of individuation from other material processes being merely an illusion. Nagarjuna's "middle way" marks the possibility of moving beyond this kind of false dichotomy and beyond the vicious circle of a mutually entailing reification and nihilism.

However, this desire is not always so evident in Nagarjuna's philosophical style. With its provocative negative dialectic and determined scepticism, his writing, at times, seems to encourage this lurching away from reification and towards the other nihilistic extreme. The last two verses of chapter IX are indicative of his approach:

Seeing and hearing, etc.,
And feeling, etc.,
If that to which they belong does not exist,
They themselves do not exist (27).

For whomever prior to,
Simultaneous with, or after seeing, etc., there is nothing,
For such a one, assertions like "it exists" or "it does not exist"-
Such conceptions will cease" (27).

These verses might seem to be denying the existence of the phenomenal world and individuals to perceive that world. There are many verses in Nagarjuna's work that are of this kind; they seem to express an extreme scepticism about the world that has encouraged a reading of Nagarjuna's work, and of Buddhist philosophy more generally, as being nihilistic. If a philosopher like Nagarjuna has the gall to deny the existence of the self and of other phenomena in the world, then what follows from this is the denial of all existence. However, the meaning of the word "exist" in the assertions quoted above and from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy is very important in showing why Nagarjuna's position is not nihilistic at all.

Elsewhere, Nagarjuna rejects with persuasive force the instinct towards reification, but he does so in a way that steers the reader away from any nihilistic denial of meaningful existence. In the following passage, he uses the word "exist" again and another word, "empty", and both these terms are of central importance to the ontological position that provides the foundation for Nagarjuna's "middle way":

If there is essence, the whole world
Will be unarising, unceasing,
And static. The entire phenomenal world
Would be immutable.

If it (the world) were not empty,
Then action would be without profit.
The act of ending suffering and
Abandoning misery and defilement would not exist (72).

In these oft-quoted verses, Nagarjuna claims that the lurching from reification to the other extreme of nihilism is a philosophical misstep. Instead, he argues that breaking out of the instinct to reify, far from leading inevitably to nihilism, actually enables moral progress and can lead to the alleviation of suffering. These verses are incredibly dense with meaning, but they are fundamentally claiming that hope lies in the “emptiness of existence”. To draw out the details of how Nagarjuna makes this argument, it will be necessary to analyze the rest of his text, by explaining what he means by “emptiness” and, therefore, what he means by “existence”.

Nagarjuna refutes the idea that phenomena might be essential, independent or ultimate by establishing, as an alternative, an ontology based on emptiness. Jay Garfield states the centrality of this concept of emptiness to the project of philosophy, the task of the philosopher being to “steer a middle path between reification and nihilism using emptiness as his compass” (136). Though the conventional Western meaning of this term has negative connotations, in Buddhist philosophy there is a far more positive use of the concept, as Garfield explains in the introduction to his commentary on the text. Using the philosophical commonplace of the table, Garfield states that “when [a follower of Nagarjuna] says of a table that it is empty, that assertion by itself is incomplete. It invites the question, Empty of what? And the answer is, Empty of inherent existence, or self-nature, or, in more Western terms, *essence*” (89). Garfield goes on to explain the implications of this emptiness and, in so doing, posits an alternative to reification and its triad of core qualities (essential-independent-ultimate):

“[t]o say that it lacks essence ... is to say ... that its existence *as the object that it is – as a table* – depends not on *it*, nor on any purely nonrelational characteristics, but depends on us as well. That is, if our culture had not evolved this manner of furniture, what appears to us to be an obviously unitary object might instead be correctly described as five objects: four quite useful sticks absurdly surmounted by a pointless slab of stick-wood waiting to be carved ... It is also to say that the table depends for its existence on its parts, on its causes, on its material, and so forth. Apart from these, there is no table” (90).

This passage argues that the rejection of the notion of *essential* existence inevitably entails the rejection of the possibility of *independent* and *ultimate* existence also. Against the

reificationist's view of phenomena, the Madhyamikan philosopher claims that the very fact that the table has no essential nature, stems from the fact that its existence is dependent on so many other things, besides itself. It is dependent on its constituent parts but, crucially, it is dependent on the human and social context within which it functions.²

The ontological perspective that Nagarjuna argues for and that Garfield summarizes with his account of the dependent arising of the table (and of all other phenomena) is put forward as an antidote, not only to the essentialist, independent, ultimate ontological position of reification, but also to a mutually entailing nihilism. The selves of individuals, as well as the objects out in the world, do not exist (in the sense of existing essentially, or dependently, or ultimately), but they *do* exist as entities that are inessential (or "empty"), that are deeply interconnected (or "dependent") and that are part of the vast causal nexus of immanent (or "conventional") reality.

One final point ought to be made regarding the Buddhist notion of the conventional, as it is particularly relevant to DeLillo's cultivation of ambiguity and frustration of singular, univocal interpretations. This idea of the conventional and of "conventional truth" is placed in opposition, by Nagarjuna, to the idea of "ultimate truth", and the importance of this concept is evident from the fact that he addresses it in the first and last verse of his text. The opening, dedicatory verse acts as an immediate introduction to Nagarjuna's tricky style:

I prostrate to the Perfect Buddha,
The best of teachers, who taught that
Whatever is dependently arisen is
Unceasing, unborn,
Unannihilated, not permanent,
Not coming, not going,
Without distinction, without identity,
And free from conceptual construction (2).

Seemingly inscrutable, slippery and difficult to grasp upon first reading, resistant to singular interpretation, his writing, not coincidentally, has a lot in common with DeLillo's. Once again, therefore, Garfield's commentary proves helpful:

² One could imagine the very first table ever used by humankind as being something like a tree stump; before it was used as a table it was simply a tree stump, then the stump changed to become a table by virtue of it being used as such. Therefore, the table's lack of essence is connected to its dependence on other things (not least its constituent parts) and on the conventional (and, therefore, non-ultimate) world that it is nested within. It is important to remember, however, that, when it was a simple tree stump, it had no essential nature either; it was, also, profoundly dependent on its surroundings (the forest floor and its roots, for instance); and it had no ultimate or permanent nature, being, instead, just another entity as mutable and impermanent as any other. Indeed, it is this very fact – that the tree stump was empty – which allowed it to change its form of being to become, in effect, the first table in history.

[i]n the four pairwise denials, Nagarjuna is announcing that the Madhyamaka philosopher will make no positive assertions about the fundamental nature of things ... That is, [he] will be refusing to say anything about the essence of anything exactly because he will deny the coherence and utility of the concept of an essence (100-101).

Here, Garfield explains how Nagarjuna's rejection of the essentialist logic that he claims has hamstrung philosophy for too long requires the use of a negative dialectic, lest his treatise fall into self-contradiction. Obviously, it would make no logical sense to make essentialist claims about the absence of essence. The refusal to make "assertions" may seem to necessitate a vow of silence, but Nagarjuna only refuses to make statements on the "fundamental nature of things". This does not preclude him from making other assertions that are not made from a fundamental, or ultimate standpoint, but are made from a conventional standpoint. Playing at the limits of intelligibility, Nagarjuna explores the outer reaches of the conventional, pushing against the threshold, but never crossing that threshold into ultimate realms, as this would, necessarily, render him silent. Garfield makes this point clear when he writes:

[i]t is important to see that the predications that are rejected are intended to be understood as made from the ultimate standpoint ...[but]... Nagarjuna will deny that it is possible to assert anything from the ultimate standpoint. He will urge that all truth is relative and conventional (100-101).

What lies behind this argument is the distinction that Buddhist philosophy makes between ultimate and conventional truth. The first kind of truth lies beyond the realms of all human discourse and, so, nothing can be said regarding it. Once an attempt is made to conceive of "ultimate truth", this conception is established in opposition to its counterpart ("conventional truth") and it takes the form of a linguistic, and therefore conventional, designation. Any attempt to speak about ultimate truth will come up against this impasse; it will embody the contradiction implicit in any effort to talk about (make conventional pronouncements on) an ultimate reality. Therefore, what humans have are conventional forms of interfacing with a conventional reality. Philosophical discourse, which Nagarjuna both employs and simultaneously critiques, is just one of these forms. As Garfield explains:

Nagarjuna, like Western sceptics, systematically eschews the defense of positive metaphysical doctrines regarding the nature of things, arguing rather that any such positive thesis is incoherent and that, in the end, our conventions and our conceptual framework can never be justified by demonstrating their correspondence to an independent reality. Rather, he suggests, what counts as real depends precisely on our conventions (88-89).

What the philosopher is left with is, for the Buddhist, more than enough. Convention (including all philosophical discourse) may not be able to uncover the ultimate nature of

reality, but it is sufficient to enlighten us on the conventional reality we find ourselves within and to free us from the primal confusion of reification and nihilism that seem to be part of the very fabric of this reality. This valorization of conventional truth has positive ethical implications, because it emphasizes that human problems (whether epistemological, existential or ethical) can have human solutions. We are not locked in a cycle of oscillating between nihilism and reification, but are capable of escaping this towards a more ethically sound engagement with reality. Towards this goal, Nagarjuna's treatise – like Jeff's passage throughout the narrative of *Zero K* – is aimed.

This article will show how these ideas are central to the way that Jeff responds initially to the Convergence and to the posthuman problems that it represents. At first, he will be shown to slip into the mutually entailing extremes of reification and nihilism that Nagarjuna warns against. However, the argument of this article is that Jeff discovers a way out of this vicious circle that is analogous to the Middle Way promoted within Buddhist ethics.

2. The Convergence of Reification and Nihilism

As Jeff enters into the world of the Convergence, it becomes clear that its headquarters have been designed to re-inforce the mind/body dichotomy, a philosophical construct that might be seen as one symptom of the reification/nihilism sickness in Western philosophy. The Convergence marks a regression to a naïve Cartesianism, by upholding this dichotomy and insisting on the separate integrity of these two categories. It does this in two related ways: firstly, it produces in any perceiving subject who engages with its headquarters a profound sense of disembodiment, and, secondly, it follows this up with the reduction of subjects to merely and only physical bodies frozen in pods. Anyone visiting the Convergence, who, like Jeff, gains access all the way to the hospice where subjects await their cryogenic freezing, will experience the dizzying shift between these two extremes of disembodiment and bodily objectification.

Jeff's sense of disembodiment is emphasized from the beginning of his arrival at the Convergence headquarters, an arrival which is deeply disorientating. As his father lectures him on the Cartesian promises of cryogenics ("...there are ways to counteract the circumstances that lead to the end. Mind and body are restored" (8)), Jeff sums up his feelings: "I was disoriented ... this was my father across the desk and none of it was familiar, not the situation or the physical environment or the bearded man himself" (8). It becomes quickly apparent that the environment of the Convergence has been designed to instil this sense of disorientation, of disembodiment. He describes his sleeping quarters: "[t]he room was small and featureless. It was generic to the point of being a thing with walls. The ceiling

was low, the bed was bedlike, the chair was a chair. There were no windows" (21). This environment seems to compel a level of introspection that forces a transcendence of the body: "[t]he room made me feel that I was being absorbed into the essential content of the place. I sat in the chair, eyes closed. I saw myself sitting here. I saw the complex itself from somewhere in the stratosphere". Outside his room, Jeff finds the halls of the compound to be similarly disorientating: "I walked the halls. The doors here were painted in gradations of muted blue and I tried to name the shades. Sea, sky, butterfly, indigo. All these were wrong and I began to feel more foolish with every step I took" (23). Jeff's lifelong compulsion of naming things, of marrying what he sees to a linguistic image, does not have the usual, reassuring effect of unifying subject and object and placing him in his environment. Jeff then has the realization that this effect is by design, the Convergence headquarters are a work of art created to frustrate this unification and to induce a sense of disembodiment: "[t]hen the idea hit me ... the halls were pure design, the doors simply one element in the overarching scheme" (23). Using language that harks back to Bill Gray's analysis of art in *Mao II*, he narrates: "I wondered whether this was visionary art ... I liked the idea ... it met the standards of unlikelihood, or daring dumb luck, that can mark the most compelling art" (23-24). Within these corridors, Jeff finds particular works of art that compound this sense of alienation, disorientation and disembodiment. One of these works is a mannequin set into "a recess in the wall ... a figure standing there, arms, legs, head, torso, a thing fixed in place" (24). This object seems to Jeff to be an abomination, a sick parody, "a molded plastic version of the human body, a jointed model of a woman" (24). He expresses a desire to reach out and make contact with the thing, to breach the boundary between himself and the object, to humanize it: "[a] hand on a breast, a hand sliding up a thigh. It's something I would have done once upon a time" (24-25). However, the repressive regime of the Convergence forbids this breach: "[h]ere and now, the cameras in place, the monitors, an alarm mechanism on the body itself – I was sure of this" (25). Jeff is forced to engage with the work in a purely visual (non-tactile) way: "I stood back and looked" (25).

Jeff's description of the mannequin shows it as an enactment of his own response to the environment of the Convergence: "[t]he head was a near oval, arms positioned in a manner ...[of]... self-defense, withdrawal, with one foot set to the rear" (24). Jeff echoes this description when he later summarizes his disembodied position:

[t]he room in the long empty hall. The chair, the bed, the bare walls, the low ceiling. Sitting in the room and then wandering the halls I could feel myself lapsing into my smallest self, all the vainglorious ideas around me shrunk into personal reverie because what am I in this place but someone in need of self-defense (56).

The Convergence has forced upon Jeff a sense of alienation from his own body and from the bodies around him; it has successfully stranded him in extreme introspection, in a disembodied existence.

This process of disorientation from his surroundings, and the attendant sense of alienation from his own body, reaches a culmination when Jeff is taken down to the hospice where the subjects of the cryogenic procedure wait. Jeff's journey deep into the heart of the Convergence is designed to disorientate: "[w]e ... entered an enclosure and as the access door slid shut ... I became faintly aware of motion that may have been horizontal .. we were inserted into a vertical shaft, proceeding downward, so I imagined ... The effect was a free-floating sensation, nearly out-of-body" (90). This experience then segues into something like its opposite as Jeff is confronted by the people waiting to undergo their procedures. He enters the hospice with the intention of making a connection with someone: "I thought I might talk to someone among the bodies-in-waiting" (92). Again, however, his attempt to make a connection is thwarted: "I began to think I'd blundered my way into a half-empty warehouse of bodies, barely an eye blinking or a finger twitching" (92). Jeff sees this reduction of people to only bodies as evidence of how repressive and totalitarian the regime of the Convergence actually is: "I saw eyes, hands, hair, skin tone, facial configuration ... not patients but subjects, submissive and unstirring" (93). These people are "unstirring" because their movement is decreasing, as they gradually approach the enforced stasis of their cryogenic deaths at the hands of the Convergence. Jeff's somber conclusion is another rare example of DeLillo's use of direct, scathing critique, one that, again, calls to mind Bill Gray's impassioned denunciation of totalitarianism in *Mao II*: "I did not see peace, comfort and dignity, only [people] under the influence of others" (93).

The Convergence generates the opposing extremes of disembodiment and bodily objectification and both of these opposing extremes are predicated upon the dualistic mind/body distinction that originates in Cartesian philosophy and that persists in some approaches to post-humanism. In the first case, subjects are dislocated from their bodies and stranded in apparently incorporeal thought – they are depicted as being all mind and no body. In the second case, the reverse is true: subjects are estranged from thought and from the nebulous mysteries of the mind; they are depicted as being all body and no mind. The Convergence imposes these two conflicting visions of the individual, in order to deny its subjects the genuine, integrated embodiment that resides in the middle ground between these two extremes.

However, if this is by design, then the question remains of who is behind that design, of what artist, or artists, could be responsible for such a regime. The answer comes in the form of the characters of "the Stenmark twins", who enter the novel when Jeff is permitted to observe a meeting of the organizing committee of the Convergence. As Jeff stands at a viewing slot through which he can watch the meeting take place, he describes how "two men entered the room, tall and fair-skinned, twins ... [and] [t]hey stood one to either side of the table and spoke without introduction, each yielding to the other in flawless transition" (69). Although they speak in "flawless transition", their separateness is constantly underlined as

they engage in a back and forth, ruminating on the meaning and consequences of the Convergence. Their dialogue presents either utopic or apocalyptic visions, not allowing for any position in between. For instance, one states: “[c]onsider two possibilities”, and the other suggests, “[w]e wanted to rewrite the future, all our futures, and ended with a single empty page”, “[o]r”, the first twin replies, “... we were among those few who altered all life on the planet, for all time to come” (71). Once again, the language used here recalls the debate DeLillo stages in *Mao II* regarding the potential of art to either “*alter* the inner life of the culture” (italics added), or to be subsumed into the marketplace, to be turned, in effect, into an “empty page”. Bill Gray’s quest in *Mao II* is for a viable alternative to these, either impossible or unappealing, extremes. Jeff, in *Zero K*, faces a very similar challenge.

Jeff is quick to identify the problem, intuiting that the Stenmark twins are not to be trusted. He shares the view of the Convergence presented above: that it is designed to alienate the individual and that it achieves this by launching its attack on two fronts, through the twin processes of disembodiment and corporeal objectification. Jeff has a moment of epiphany:

I understood at once, intuitively, ... that these two men ... were the individuals responsible for the look and touch and temperament of the entire complex. This was their design ... the tone and flow, the half-sunken structure itself and everything inside it ... This was their aesthetic of seclusion and concealment, all the elements that I found so eerie and disembodiment ... and the idea made me feel again that I was dwindling into indistinctness. And the dead, or maybe dead ... the cryogenic dead, upright in their capsules. This was art in itself, nowhere else but here (73-74).

Jeff sees the Stenmark twins, like the Convergence that they designed, as embodying the oppressive rigidity of binary categories. This is shown through the fantasy world that he imagines for them: “I found myself wondering if they were married. Yes, to sisters. I saw them walking in a wooded area, all four, the brothers ahead, then the sisters ahead ... the distance between the couples coolly measured and carefully maintained” (75). This picture of a double binary recalls Jeff’s initial arrival at the Convergence when he sees two male guards and two women wearing chadors at the entrance to the complex. This doubling of two categorical counterparts underlines the repressive and restrictive resistance that the Convergence mounts to anything resembling Middle Way ontology and ethics explored in the first section of this article.

3. Jeff’s Nihilistic Rejection of the Convergence

As part one of the novel comes to a close and Jeff is about to return to his ordinary life, he takes one last trip down to the site where the cryogenically frozen bodies are stored.

Encountering the bodies in their pods “emptied of indispensable organs” (146) is, doubtless, an extreme experience, so it is understandable that his response is an extreme one: “[t]he fact of containment, alignment, bodies set in assigned positions. Woman man woman. It occurred to me that these were humans as mannequins ... brainless objects ... [a] freezeframe of naked humans in pods” (146). Jeff’s rejection of this commitment to solidity, this reduction of humanity to a set of objects, seems to be total: “I 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” (146). However, what underpins Jeff’s interpretation of the image of cryogenically frozen humans is his naïve adherence to binary categories and their associated value judgements. Subjects have a mind that is original to them, that is the essence of them and that is located somewhere inside them; when they are frozen and placed into pods they become bodies, mere objects that are like inessential copies of the original subjects and are “outside” in the sense that they are empty shells. Before he articulates his one-sided critique quoted above Jeff longs for the other naïve conception of humanity: “I wanted to see beauty in these stilled figures, an imposing design not of clockwork bodies but of the simple human structure ... each individual implacably unique in touch, taste and spirit” (146). Jeff is trapped in an oscillation between these two extreme conceptions of humanity: one based on a hard materialism and the other on a naïve romanticism. Note how these responses correspond to the vicious circle that Nagarjuna warns against in his treatise: the naïve romanticism being a form of reification that entails a lurching towards hard materialism, a philosophical position that itself can be seen as a form of nihilism. These opposing ideas also broadly correspond to the two responses to the convergence that are on offer: one being a complete rejection of it and the other being an awestruck celebration. This is the same Jeff who is presented at the beginning of the novel as being trapped between the two unappealing responses to his father’s influence: unequivocal rebellion or slavish conformity. His overall response to the Convergence, as with his initial response to his father, seems to be the former. However, he admits a seed of doubt, by, after dismissing the subjects in their pods as merely “[m]annequined lives”, asking the following question: “[w]as this a facile idea?” (146). This seed of doubt grows and eventually becomes Jeff’s more nuanced and, therefore, more powerful critique of the Convergence. Something that Jeff encounters next on his guided tour of the cryogenic facility reveals a crack in the solid aesthetic of the Convergence, a crack within which this seed of doubt would flourish.

Jeff describes the momentous encounter: “[t]he room was stone cold and ... toward a far corner ... I saw ... a figure seated on the floor near the junction of the two walls. Small human figure, motionless, seeping gradually into my level of awareness” (148). There are two things that have to be noted about Jeff’s description: firstly, the contrast between the solidity of the room, described as being “stone cold” and the liquidity of the human figure, who is depicted as “seeping” into Jeff’s consciousness. The second thing to note is the position of the figure, who is sitting on the floor “near the junction of the two walls”. Because the figure is occupying an in-between space there is the implication that they may represent the loosening up of the binary categories that have up to that point dominated the aesthetic of

the Convergence. This idea is confirmed when Jeff continues his narrative: "I had to tell myself that I was not somewhere else trying to visualize what I was actually seeing, here and now, in solid form" (148). The figure is both "seeping" like a liquid into Jeff's consciousness and is resolutely there, like a solid object, unavoidably present. The idea of this figure representing a synthesis of opposites is further conveyed by her posture, which resembles a yin and yang symbol: "[o]ne arm was raised and bent toward the body at neck level. The other arm was waist-high at a matching angle" (148-149).

Jeff sees her as the kind of artwork whose effect transcends interpretation: "[t]he fact of life, one small body with beating heart in this soaring mausoleum ... a living breathing artform, boy or girl ... offering nothing more for me to think or imagine" (149). The process of interpretation, so entangled as it is with dualistic categories and binary judgements, is arrested by the profound synthesis of this figure who is both subject and object, inside and outside, liquid and solid. This recalls Susan Sontag's famous dismissal of interpretation in favour of an approach to analysis which foregrounds the affective response to a work of art (see *Against Interpretation*). Jeff is compelled not only to look at the figure, but also to have, folding, as he does, his arms across his chest "to contain [his] response to the beauty of the scene" (149), a highly affective and embodied experience. This is the beginning of Jeff's escape from his entrapment between reactionary extremes, it is the beginning of his path towards a "middle way" response to the challenge posed both by his father and by the post-humanism of the Convergence.

Before exploring Jeff's escape it will be useful to briefly consider the area of philosophy known as Posthumanism and to address the controversies that are raging therein, controversies which, in turn, are relevant to the wider problems of reification and nihilism discussed in this article. At the origins of posthumanism is the contentious definition of information put forward by Shannon and Wiener, which separated information from any grounding in the physical environment that humans inhabit. This led to two strands of posthumanism, both equally extreme and, as will be argued presently, unappealing. Firstly, there is the strain that has been called transhumanism, a kind of gleeful embrace of a future where humanity is liberated from the body – which it sees as a hinderance to human adaptation and survival – and free to enter completely the virtual realm. The DeLillo scholar Erik Cofer locates this offshoot in the work of Nick Bostrom and Ray Kurzweil and observes that: "the body, in transhumanist estimation, equates to a useful but flawed vessel for consciousness – a temporary site of data storage until a more efficient model is developed" (9). He correctly equates the thinking of Bostrom and Kurzweil, as well as the writing style of the latter, with the radical speeches of the Stenmark twins in *Zero K*. The second strain lurches to the opposite extreme in that it is deeply pessimistic about the future open to humankind, if the convergence of humanity and technology that has accelerated in the posthumanist era, continues. Theorists like William Mitchell, Jonathan Crary and Friedrich Kittler see the emergence of posthumanism as heralding the destruction of the human race.

For them, the digitization of information threatens to sever humanity from any frame of reference and contact with objective reality; according to this analysis, in the posthuman era humankind risks being virtualized out of existence.³

A more balanced and ambivalent version of posthumanist philosophy is offered by Katherine Hayles, whose work is a likely influence on DeLillo's depiction of posthumanism in *Zero K*. The poise and composure of Hayles is evident in the following passage:

my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival (5).

As this article has aimed to show, the kind of seduction that Hayles refers to in this passage is precisely what the Convergence is engaged in and what Artis and Ross fall victim to. Transhumanism is the critical expression of this fantasy of power and immortality.

In contrast, the image Hayles evokes of human life as being "embedded in a material world of great complexity" is an image that is thoroughly consistent with the image found in Buddhist philosophy and in notions of dependent arising and emptiness. In the penultimate paragraph of the novel, when Jeff sits on a city bus with an unknown child before the setting sun, DeLillo evokes the same sense of balance in the face of the posthumanist future as Hayles, when he writes: "I told myself that the boy was not seeing the sky collapse upon us but was finding the purest astonishment in the intimate touch of earth and sun" (274). Both the boy and Jeff eschew any apocalyptic interpretation of the sunset and the posthuman future

³ There are interesting parallels between Jeff's response to digital information, specifically the digital images he encounters at the Convergence, and the response to the digital image by these posthumanist philosophers. As Jeff narrates: "[t]hese were visual fictions ... digital bits, digital code, all of it computer-generated, none of it real" (152). His words echo two post-humanist critics in particular, William Mitchell and Jonathan Crary. The latter uses language, and expresses a distaste, similar to Jeff's when he writes, "[i]f these [digital] images can be said to refer to anything it is to millions of bits of electronic mathematical data" (2, *Techniques of the Observer*). The former expresses a shock like that of Jeff's, when he states that "images in the post-photographic era can no longer be guaranteed as visual truth – or even as signifiers with stable meaning and value" (57, *Reconfigured Eye*). The apparently naïve use of terms like "visual truth" and "stable meaning and value", reveal the problem with this kind of reactionary response to the digital image. However, the most notorious example of this kind of extreme analysis comes from Friedrich Kittler, who describes digitization in the following terms:

"[o]nce movies and music, phone calls and texts reach households via optical fiber cables, the formerly distinct media of television, radio, telephone, and mail converge ... The general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interface. Sense and the senses turn into eyewash" (*Gramophone*, 1-2).

Jeff strives after a more nuanced, less reactionary, response to the digitization of information.

it can be seen to represent, instead perceiving it as an enactment of the interdependence of all phenomena, as the “intimate touch” of dependent arising. Hayles takes a position within posthumanism that lies somewhere between the extremes of transhumanist euphoria and antihumanist despair; she walks a middle way which acknowledges the opportunities of digitization, without being mesmerized by it and which shows awareness of its potential dangers, without denouncing it as the harbinger of the apocalypse. Jeff's discovery of a middle way in his narrative is an implicit endorsement of Hayle's posthumanist compromise.

4. Jeff's Attainment of a Middle Way

In the penultimate chapter of the novel, there is an air of defeat in Jeff's narrative, which takes the form of a series of disjointed paragraphs, scattered about like photographs. He offers images of his life post-Convergence, of his quotidian routines, of the things he observes in the streets and of his time working as a “Compliance and Ethics Officer” (266) at a small college in Connecticut, with what he describes as “students of middling promise” (268). He seems to see his life as a defeat, because it has become so unspectacular, so ordinary; nothing like the life (and death) of his father. “The long soft life is what I'm settling into” (268), he writes, and speculates as to why he has pursued a life like that of the students he works with, a life, merely, of “middling promise” (268). He suggests the following answer: “[t]here's the wide-ranging dynamic of my father's corporate career and there's the endland of the Convergence and I tell myself that I'm not hiding inside a life that's a reaction to this, or a retaliation for this” (266). The fact that Jeff feels the need to tell himself this implies that he actually thinks there is some truth to what he is denying: that his choice of an ordinary life is a negative response to the two towers that cast a shadow onto his life, his father and the organization of the Convergence. This article argues that Jeff's life is indeed a reaction to these two forces, but what Jeff does not see is that his journey through the novel has been the pursuit of an appropriate response to these forces, one that is neither reactionary nor radical, neither a submissive yielding nor an outright rejection. Therefore, Jeff is wrong to see his life as an act of “hiding”, to see it as a defeat. The final part of this article will argue that the end of the novel, in fact, reveals how Jeff's forging of a “middling” life, his walking a middle path, can be seen as a positive and empowering reaction to “the forces that made [him]” (271), specifically his father, and to the forces that continue to shape his world, namely the technological changes that continue to define the contemporary posthuman moment.

At the beginning of the final chapter, DeLillo sets the scene, reminding the reader of Jeff's position: resolutely in-between, as always, in the middle. The narrative begins: “[t]his was a crosstown bus, west to east, a man and a woman seated near the driver, a woman and a boy at the rear of the bus. I found my place, midway, looking nowhere in particular, mind blank or

nearly so, until I began to notice a glow, a tide of light" (273). It is significant that Jeff has taken a position midway, between three adults, the man and woman at the front of the bus and the mother figure at the back. His place on the bus represents his place in life, between the three adults of greatest influence: his father and mother-in-law, Artis (embodied by the couple at the front of the bus, their faces directed forwards, like Ross and Artis looking towards the future) and his mother (embodied by the boy's mother at the back of the bus, who sits dependably beside her son, "watching with him" (274)).

The "tide of light" is the beginning of what Jeff describes as "a natural phenomenon [that occurs] here in Manhattan, once or twice a year, in which the sun's rays align with the local street grid" (273). If the boy's mother can be seen to represent Jeff's mother, then the boy can be seen to stand for Jeff himself. The boy's response to the sight of the setting sun as it "balance[s] with uncanny precision between rows of high-rise buildings" is, therefore, hugely significant. It is described as a "human wail" (273) and, later, as a "prelinguistic grunt" (274). Jeff is uncharacteristically serene about the fact that he does not know the name of this natural phenomenon: "I didn't know what this event was called but I was seeing it now and so was the boy" (273). It seems, he has grown out of his compulsive habit of naming things, he has lost the childlike need to pin things down, to know things totally. He finds, in the boy's reaction, an appropriate response to the situation: "these howls of awe", he writes, "were far more suitable than words" (274). As stated in the introduction to this chapter, Jeff's journey through the novel has been a search for a "suitable" response, so the boy's, and Jeff's, reaction to the setting sun holds a clue to whether Jeff has found what he has been searching for. To explore this question thoroughly, it is necessary to carry out an in-depth analysis of the final chapter.

Throughout the novel, DeLillo draws upon the metaphors of rock and water, using them to represent separate things, whilst, at the same time, exploring how they interact and interconnect. With rocks being solid and water being liquid, the reference, in the final chapter, to the sun (essentially a ball of burning gas) completes the trio of material states. However, DeLillo's depiction of the sun does not show it as an image of gas alone; rather, his rendering of the sun is that of an object which comprises all three material states in endlessly kinetic interaction and interconnection. At one point, in words that echo Jeff's earlier description of the rock in the gallery, it is referred to as a "great round ruddy mass" (273); later, it is described as a "tide of light", a phrase which recalls Ben Ezra's allusion to the "flood" of mass consciousness made earlier in the novel; and, finally, it is portrayed as being "radiant" and "flaring", words which emphasize the physical processes occurring in its gaseous core. The experience of the sunset as a unity of different material states, as the culmination of all flows of matter, is shown in the following image: "[t]he full solar disk, bleeding into the streets, lighting up the towers to either side of us" (274). The sun is presented as, variously, a solid "disk", a liquid that "bleeds" and a gas giant that emits light. As such, it stands as a fitting emblem of the Buddhist conception of reality explored in

section one of this article, specifically the notions of the dependent arising and interconnectedness of all phenomena.

Jeff's experience of the sunset shows that, by the end of the novel, he has attained this perception of reality. DeLillo shows this by emphasizing how Jeff's response is truly embodied, by showing that it involves various sensory systems, not only the visual. As he narrates, his perception of the event quickly moves beyond just the visual field: "I looked at the shimmer on the back of my hands. I looked and then listened, startled by a human wail" (273). His auditory system is engaged by the boy's "prelinguistic grunts", while the somatic system is engaged by the feeling of the sun's light as it shimmers on his skin. Jeff's reception of the sunset is a synesthetic experience and, as such, it calls into question the limited, purely visual, conception of the image that has prevailed in the history of image studies and aesthetics. The final chapter of *Zero K* indicates the need for a broader, synesthetic perspective on the image. Thomas Nail has the following to say on synesthesia and his words shed light on the depth of Jeff's experience of the sunset: "[t]he aesthetic field is ... synesthetic ...[because]... all the senses of a given sensorium are always active and sensate at once to varying degrees. Even when one is simply viewing a piece of visual art, one is also touching the ground, smelling the air of other bodies in the museum, tasting one's mouth, or hearing the echo of footsteps and low voices in the museum" (73). While Jeff is not perceiving a work of art, he is engaging with an image and his experience of that image is, like the experience of Nail's museumgoer, synesthetic.

Jeff's turning away from the sunset – which is, in effect, a refusal to see it, a choice to de-emphasize the visual – recalls his habit, referred to throughout the novel, of standing in darkened rooms with his eyes shut. The first mention of this bizarre routine comes, appropriately, in his conversation with Artis, where she first mentions the droplet of water on a shower curtain and her memory of it. Like Artis, Jeff wants to share a memory that somehow gets to the heart of human experience and so he tells her about his odd habit: "[s]ometimes in a dark room ... I will shut my eyes. I walk into the room and shut my eyes" (18). Throughout *Zero K*, Jeff is – like Billy Twillig in DeLillo's strange epic *Ratner's Star* – perpetually confounded and this is certainly the case in his attempts to understand the meaning of this peculiar ritual. "Is this a surrender to the dark?", he asks, "[i]s this an accommodation? Let the dark dictate the terms of the situation? What is this?" (18). The words "surrender" and "accommodation" show that he thinks his actions are a sign of weakness, or defeat. However, as his speculations continue, he moves closer to the reality of what his standing in the dark actually means: "[a]m I testing myself by doubling the dark?", he asks finally. The idea of "testing" oneself approaches the truth of Jeff's habit. The point of a test is for the person being tested to come up with an appropriate response to the questions asked; similarly, Jeff's whole journey throughout the novel has been a quest for just such an appropriate response.

Mark Hansen's writing on the power of blindness as an act of defiance is significant here. It is worth quoting Hansen's interpretation of the work of the media critic Paul Virilio at length because his words explain the meaning of *Zero K*'s incredibly loaded final sentence. As Hansen writes:

Virilio ...speak[s]... of a "right to blindness" ...[where]... blindness becomes the basis for an ethics of perception: "it would surely be a good thing if we ... asked ourselves about the individual's *freedom of perception* and the threats brought to bear on that freedom by the industrialization of vision ... Surely it would then be appropriate to entertain a kind of *right to blindness* ...". More than simply a right not to see, the right to blindness might best be understood as a right to see in a fundamentally different way (104).

This is how Jeff's standing in dark rooms and turning from the light of the sunset ought to be seen: as acts of defiance against ocularcentrism and what Virilio calls the "industrialization of vision", and as attempts to embrace an alternative way of "seeing", a way that is at once synesthetic and embodied and also in line with the perceptual shift that Nagarjuna calls for in his treatise on the Middle Way. Hansen illustrates this idea perfectly when he writes:

what better way can there be to resist the industrialization of perception than by reinvesting the bodily basis of perception? Faced with the all-too-frequent contemporary predicament of "not being able to believe our eyes", are we not indeed impelled to find other ways to ground belief, ways that reactivate the bodily modalities – tactility, affectivity, proprioception – from which images acquire their force and their "reality" in the first place? (104).

What Hansen is implying here is that, if we can no longer believe our eyes, then perhaps we can "believe our bodies"; in other words, while an ocularcentric culture has produced the "industrialization of perception", a synesthetic, active and embodied reception of images (not only through visual channels) is, potentially, the way towards an alternative, and more authentic, experience of contemporary reality. When Jeff declares: "I didn't need heaven's light", this ocularcentric tradition is what he is rejecting. A different way of "grounding belief" is needed, therefore; one that has less to do with "heaven's light", less to do with the privileging of vision that has always characterized the study of images, and more to do with the synesthetic, embodied alternative suggested by the "boy's cries of wonder" (274). This rejection of "heaven's light" also parallels the emphasis on the immanent and the conventional, so central to the notion of the Middle Way explored in this article. Jeff's turning away from this light represents his turning toward the immanent and conventional truth of Nagarjuna's doctrine of the Middle Way.

Conclusion

The analysis put forward in this article has been an attempt to contribute to the strain of DeLillo criticism that avoids singular and univocal conclusions, or definitive and declarative statements. Taking DeLillo's obvious courting of ambiguity, ambivalence and hesitation to heart means that a position of critical distance and balance is most appropriate when dealing with his texts. Some critics have also taken this approach to *Zero K*; however, as always, several have not. To take one such example: in Nathan Ashman's analysis of the novel, he makes several observations that agree with the arguments presented in this article. For instance, Ashman accurately states that "*Zero K* offers an ... examination of [the] conjunction between death and technology ...[and]... oscillates around both the transience of human existence and the resultant yearning to circumvent the inevitability of death" (1-2). Ashman then abandons this early tone of balance and equanimity when he goes on to state the main thesis of his paper:

rather than circumventing death and prolonging life as intended, this article argues that DeLillo instead presents cryonic freezing as a form of *eternal death*. With bodies suspended in a state of endlessly deferred mitosis, *Zero K* offers an almost posthuman vision that forcefully disrupts recognized polarities of living and dead (2).

As a reading of how, specifically, the Convergence functions in DeLillo's novel, Ashman's interpretation is sound. The problem comes, however, when he extrapolates from this an analysis of the novel as a whole. When Ashman claims that "*Zero K* amplifies DeLillo's examination of the conjunction between death and technology ... violently disrupting binaries of living and dead, organic and artificial" (10), one might agree, but with the caveat that DeLillo's *use of the Convergence* can be interpreted in this way, not the novel as a whole. What Ashman leaves out of his analysis, and what this article acknowledges, is the other side of the coin. His lack of critical restraint is evident in his language when he writes: "this essay argues that [in] *Zero K* ... death's ineluctability is disturbed and remodulated, meaning that temporal and spatial boundaries ... become violently unhinged and entirely unmeasurable" (2) and when he arrives at the gloomy conclusion that "[a]s the tactility of our already loosening reality begins to unravel, DeLillo presents us with the disorientating consequences of a world stripped of death as the final frontier of the real" (10). There is no evidence that Jeff and the other characters in *Zero K* exist in a "world stripped of death"; the actual conclusion of Jeff's narrative sees him inhabiting a much less spectacular reality, one that might inspire less flashy rhetoric, but one that, as this article has argued, has its own truth and hopeful potency.

Other critical responses have been far more measured and, therefore, effective. For instance, agreeing with the main argument of this article, Alexandra K. Glavanakova writes: "[w]hen reflecting on the interaction between science and religion, between Americans and

the technoscape they inhabit, DeLillo neither presents a utopian technocracy, nor does he subscribe to the contemporary technophobic nightmares so typical especially of cinematic science fiction" (105). Ashman's reading of *Zero K* could be described as being coloured by "technophobic nightmares" and, as was shown above, certain exponents of posthumanist philosophy also paint similarly bleak dreamscapes of the future. In place of these extremes, Glavanakova argues convincingly for a reading of *Zero K* as a novel which hovers between this blind optimism and myopic pessimism. The following shows that, for Glavanakova, the job of the novelist is to ask complex questions, not necessarily to state univocal answers:

DeLillo posits the question of whether it is possible to enter the posthuman condition that embraces the promises and threats of technology without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and immortality: Can a human being consider the possibility of re-encountering oneself "like a newborn machine" and still remain human (*Zero K* 238)? (100).

Jeff's initial resistance to his father takes the form of an apathetic opting out of life. Where his father plunged forward through life, Jeff drifts; where his father acquired and expanded, Jeff relinquishes and shrinks. However, by the end of the novel, Jeff breaks out of this inaction and insignificance, entering into the workplace by accepting a job at a small college and opening up to the modest community that this job provides him with. In some senses, this is a concession to the values of his father: entering the world of work, earning a living, trading in the marketplace. However, Jeff's concession is not complete, he does not capitulate to his father's influence by accepting the trust fund he has offered him, or by following in his footsteps in his choice of profession. Instead, he continues in a resistance that is less extreme, but no less significant, by forging a "middling life" of ordinariness and routine. Jeff takes his own path, by carving out his own quotidian life, a life which, being as it is mundane and unspectacular, stands in direct opposition to his father's. At the same time, he does not completely transcend the effect of his father as this would be impossible – after all, any individual is always, to some extent, the product of their parentage – but nor does he wilt in his father's shadow, or live a life that is a mere copy of his. Instead, he walks, like David Bell in *Americana*, a middle way between conformity and non-conformity, between compliance and outright defiance.

Likewise, Jeff finds some balance in his response to the Convergence and its activities. As shown above, Jeff is enslaved by his surroundings as he enters into the realm of the Convergence, but he would come to see how he, at the same time, might find liberation in that very same environment. At first, he is disoriented and dislocated, both spatially and philosophically, by his experience of engaging with the organization and its headquarters. He, therefore, struggles, at first, to frame any kind of response to it, as if freezing in horror. Eventually, his disorientating experiences at the Convergence direct him towards the middle way he is searching for in his response to the service the place offers and to the posthumanist

future that it represents. Jeff's movement towards an embodied engagement with the image culminates in his experience of the sunset in the final scene of the novel, but *it originates in his experiences at the Convergence*. For all its alienating power and for all its tendency towards restriction and repression, the Convergence also has the effect of guiding Jeff towards his increasingly embodied interaction with the world around him. This is because the Convergence – and the posthumanist era that it stands for – is a complex, ambivalent thing. Therefore, Jeff's ambivalence in his reflections on the organization and his interaction with his environment is entirely fitting. What this ambivalence turns into, by the end of the novel, is a perceptual middle way, which culminates in his engagement with the sunset in the final scene. His perception of this cosmic event constitutes a middle way, in the sense that it occurs in the in-between space where disembodied sensory information meets the physical substrate of the human body. Here, Jeff's body, in all of its sensory capacities, actively forges the image of the sunset in the middle way that lies between (and unites) unframed data and enframing matter.

He refuses to be seduced by the Convergence, declining to "go with" his father and mother-in-law and maintaining his critical scepticism of its activities until the end. However, at the same time, his experience at the Convergence headquarters also heralds the beginning of the awakening he undergoes in the novel. It is there that he discovers, through his engagement with its strange aesthetic, the potential richness of (synesthetic) perception available to an individual at the frontier of techno-human convergence. His experiences in the corridors of the facility set him on his way (his middle way) towards the peak experience at the end of the novel, where, to use Hansen's words, he "gives body" to the sensory information of the sunset, turning something that is "unframed, disembodied, and formless into concrete embodied information intrinsically imbued with (human) meaning" (12). Jeff pursues a middle way in the sense that he maintains *some* of the scepticism of technophobic posthumanism (by leaving the Convergence and returning to an ordinary life) and, at the same time, embraces *some* of the optimism shown by the transhumanist position (through his exploration of the limits of perception, initiated at the Convergence); and all of this without succumbing to either extreme. This is why the novel ends with Jeff sitting in the middle of a bus, looking forwards (to the future), both with a sense of apprehension and, also, with the intimation of hope that the "boy's cries of wonder" (274) provide.

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Referencing this paper:

Simon Pritchard,
'Liminal Ethics – The Doctrine of the Middle Way in Don DeLillo's *Zero K.*',
The TRELLIS Papers N° 15 (2024),
http://www.limenandtext.com/publishing_thetrellispapers.html

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