

Night without end: Don DeLillo's *Zero K*

James Brookfield
7 June 2016

Zero K, by Don DeLillo, Scribner, New York, 2016, 288 pages

Zero K, Don DeLillo's 17th novel, is a dark story about the determination of a small group of wealthy individuals to have their bodies cryogenically preserved. They hope for future physiological restoration, even as the world at large descends into social upheaval, war and environmental degradation. Images of this ugly reality permeate the novel until its anticlimactic closing.

The book offers an anxious view of the future (and the present!). That anxiety is certainly understandable, and even fitting.

The limitations of *Zero K* are not to be found in its choice of subject matter and general apprehensiveness about social developments, but in precisely how the novel conceives of the subject and portrays the contemporary world and its various social strata.

The novel is told from the viewpoint of Jeffrey Lockhart, whose father, Ross, a financier, and stepmother, Artis, an archaeologist, have decided to have their bodies frozen until the "Convergence," an intentionally mystical designation for the moment at which they anticipate medical science will be able to bring them back to life, with presumably modified and improved version of their bodies. Among the sticking points is that the patient, for lack of a better term, is euthanized at the start of the cryogenic process.

The operations take place in a vast underground complex near Chelyabinsk in Russia, an industrial center (and one-time transit point for prisoners headed to Siberia). Jeffrey who has chosen not to follow in his father's footsteps, either professionally or philosophically, is aghast at what he witnesses taking place, both at the complex and—via images projected on numerous television monitors—in the world above.

The wars in the Middle East and Ukraine as transmitted to this labyrinth are meant to inspire revulsion. Notably, however, the author makes little attempt to situate these images historically or in the context of contemporary events. Vastly different events are presented hazily as more or less equivalent manifestations of human malice. Militias and government troops in eastern Europe assault each other in one scene; in the next, beheadings are conducted by radical Islamist tendencies (presumably Al Qaeda).

Nowhere is there a suggestion that the US, the other advanced imperialist powers, or the moneyed interests behind them represented by Ross Lockhart are responsible. Death, destruction and mayhem are ubiquitous and, by implication, the common responsibility of all. A pronounced tendency toward the ahistorical was noted in the WSWs review of DeLillo's 2007 novel, *Falling Man*.

As an existential meditation on life and death, *Zero K* also falls flat, as nearly all such attempts must. The reader encounters several passages that seem at first to bear revisiting. A second, third or fourth consideration of the passages, however, takes one no further than the first. Consider, for instance, the remarks of Artis, terminally ill and awaiting her "procedure."

"I'm aware that when we see something, we are getting only a measure of information, a sense, an inkling of what really is there to see. I don't know the details or the terminology but I do know that the optic nerve is not telling the full truth. We're seeing only intimations. The rest is our invention, our way of reconstructing what is actual, if there is any such thing, philosophically, as what we call actual. I know that research is being done here, somewhere in this complex on future models of human vision. Experiments using robots, lab animals, who knows, people like me."

The train of thought lapses from a sort of wild philosophical skepticism that is presently in vogue to a horrifying conclusion—perhaps I am a lab animal here!—only to then contemplate a radiant potential future, at least for the individual concerned. Making an analogy to the improvement in her vision after a previous eye surgery, Artis anticipates that "I will be reborn into a deeper and truer reality. Lines of brilliant light, every material thing in fullness, a holy object." Jeffrey makes the point, to himself, that he can't really grasp her concept, "This was a transcendence, the promise of a lyric intensity outside the measure of normal experience." Neither perspective seems at all realistic; who, after all, would think (or speak) this way?

Moments later, a more natural "convergence" takes place as Ross joins Jeffrey and Artis in the first face-to-face meeting of the three in quite some time. This quasi-family gathering is scarred by its eerie, otherworldly setting. Jeffrey anticipates with horror that soon, "They would come and take her. They would wheel her into an elevator and take her down to one of the so-called numbered levels. She would die, chemically prompted, in a subzero vault, in a highly precise medical procedure guided by mass delusion, by superstition and arrogance and self-deception."

Most passages are less effective. Some are clearly superficial. Jeffrey, for example, avers, "I maintain myself on the puppet drug of personal technology. Every touch of a button brings the neural rush of finding something I never knew and never needed to know until it appears at my anxious fingertips." The implication, of course, is that most of humanity lives this sort of distracted existence, prisoners to various supposed technical wonders. This type of comment has become trite by now.

The novel suffers from stilted and artificial language. Whether we are hearing Jeffrey's introspection or an exchange he has with his father or partner, one is always struck by how contrived it sounds. Real people, at least those outside college English departments, are very rarely to be found pondering that their experience belongs "to no one else, not remotely, no one, anyone, ever." One can find examples of this self-consciousness by opening the book almost at random.

Then there is the wisdom of the authorities and thinkers at the complex. "People who spend time here find out eventually who they are," says one. "Not through consultation with others but through self-

examination, self-revelation. A tract of lost land, a sense of wilderness that is overwhelming. These rooms and halls, a stillness, a sense of waiting. Aren't all of us here waiting for something to happen?" Is this sort of thing being satirized? It is not always clear.

The speaker of this passage, whom Jeffrey (who likes to bestow his own names on people) has dubbed "Ben Ezra" to convey a sort of Biblical wisdom, characterizes his own outlook as a set of "ideas that attempt to confront a decimated future." Clearly we are revolted by what follows, "'And where is here?' he [Ben Ezra] said. 'Untapped reserves of rare minerals and the rolling thunder of oil money and repressive states and human rights violations and bribable officials. Minimal contact. Detachment. Disinfestation.'"

Reflecting on this, Jeffrey surmises that in this facility the utilitarian has become the totalitarian. This too strikes one as a shorthand that distorts more than illuminates. It does, however, speak to a profound degree of pessimism about the idea of human progress itself. In contemplating the age-old subject of human mortality, no one in the book imagines any sort of benevolent future in which mankind at large benefits from scientific research.

Medical technology, it seems a bit odd to have to point out, has its remarkably positive sides as well. One need consider only a few key recent discoveries and applications: targeted cancer therapies, testing of robotic limbs and their activation by neural signals, successful implanting of bionic eyes, heart transplants from cadavers, skull transplants (using bone created via 3D printing), face transplants for burn victims, possible cancer vaccines. This is an abbreviated list taken from 2014 and 2015 alone, all of which seem to have staggering potential for bettering human lives.

DeLillo's choice not to imagine the possibility of progressive social development strikes one as related in turn to another major limitation of the novel. None of its characters—Jeffrey, Ross, Artis, the "leading lights" at the Chelyabinsk facility, Jeffrey's girlfriend, her adopted Ukrainian son—are developed at all.

There are a few turns of events with an element of drama, particularly Ross's wrestling with the decision to end his life (to voluntarily go into frozen suspension, that is) at the same time as Artis. This sort of prospective semi-suicide is hardly reflected in the development of his character, though it occupies the central section of the novel. One feels little, if anything, for *any* of the characters and has the sense that the author is of the same mind.

Watch David North's remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

None of the above is to suggest that DeLillo is not a talented and thoughtful writer. His *Libra* (1988), which examined the assassination of John F. Kennedy, is a politically informed speculation on the motivations of Oswald, which earned him the enmity of reactionaries like George Will. It is far superior to Norman Mailer's fictionalized account of the same events in *Oswald's Tale* (1995).

DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), certainly worth re-reading in light of the poisoning of Flint, Michigan, was concerned with an airborne "toxic event" and the chilling bureaucratic response to it. Both novels come across in retrospect as politically and socially attuned to the grimmer currents of American political reality.

To be sure, *Zero K* has its moments. DeLillo's specialty, as it were, lies in bringing out the nightmarish elements in contemporary global life, including wars that rage on forever and create a seemingly endless stream of refugees. Among the new novel's characters is a boy who has taken to betting on the outcomes of drone strikes as previous generations might have wagered on baseball games.

Is there an alternative to all this? Various moments in the text, particularly those relating to Jeffrey and his dead mother, Madeline, as well as the unpersuasive ending, suggest that the way out of the impending disaster is to be found, if not in small, "privileged moments" of genuine interpersonal contact, then perhaps in some sort of social change in which people become more attuned to such moments. The overall tone and feel of the book is gloomy.

In his review of what is perhaps DeLillo's strongest work, *Underworld*, David Walsh made the point that a cold and detached attitude toward his characters, coincident with an excessive focus on language per se, is the most "disturbing" aspect of DeLillo's works. Walsh asked: "Doesn't the fear of demonstrating warmth emerge, in the case of a serious individual like DeLillo—but not only in his case—at least in part from the nagging feeling that one cannot have too much sympathy for a population that seems to have acquiesced to dreadful social and political conditions? The question may be posed in the artist's mind, albeit unconsciously—do these people deserve sympathy?"

If anything, this tendency, nourished to a degree by the fact that opposition to the status quo has erupted only episodically since *Underworld's* publication in 1997, is even more pronounced in *Zero K*. For this reason, some of the possibilities that might have been developed in the novel, and would have been far more interesting and engaging, remain unexplored.

Like two of the protagonists in the novel, there are hundreds of people actually seeking to cryogenically preserve themselves or family members until medical science is able to cure their terminal ailments. Some subset of this population even believe that medical advances will allow them to live indefinitely. Their stories range from the curious to the tragic.

Among the latter certainly is the case of two medical scientists in Thailand whose daughter died at age two of an incurable ailment. Shortly after the girl was pronounced legally dead, her brain was extracted from her body, frozen and shipped to the US for preservation by a company named Alcor. The parents have plans for similar "preservation." That portion of the story the media presents strikes one as terribly sad and misguided. Yet one suspects that the actual episode would be very moving.

One can imagine countless potential novelistic treatments of the issues posed by the developments in medicine. A novel that probed with some level of care the implications of this work would be potentially quite engaging. To be truly well done, however, it would need to consider or project some of the *unanticipated* consequences of the technical successes of the science and their relation to the increasing complex *social* structure at large.

What, for example, would Ross and Artis find in re-awakening 50 or 100 years into the future? At a personal level, aside from each other, whom would they relate to, as all their friends and family would have died? This itself would contain enormous elements of tragedy (and perhaps comedy too). More fundamentally, what would such a world look like? The possibilities, it would seem, are considerable.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact