

# Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*: Time, Language and Grief

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Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* portrays a world inhabited by characters whose unified, other-proof subjectivity crumbles around them to reveal the basic fibres of the biological, organicist body as this is mutated across bodies and projected across images. Such sameness and connection are primarily played out in the language and the style used. The paper examines linguistic techniques such as the use of logical conjunction (e.g., and) and causal connectives, such as because, which instead of signaling causality, constantly rephrases the same as an expanded other, thus effectively subverting our common sense perceptions. In this context, the absence of representational means of identity resulting in the redefinition of Lauren's subjectivity on a broader biological plane also reconciles her to the grief felt at her husband's death.

"The Body Artist is about time, language and grief"  
DeLillo, 27 May 2003

I

Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* is a simulation of our fast changing times, and of our perceptions of them that are both baffling and beguiling at the same time. It represents a shift from an embodied model of human (even if machinist) thought to a disembodied, bare, formalized logical, unified system, in which the human being is not seen as an individuated, closed-model system in its own right, but as a component of an all-encompassing, broader system that takes into its purview the whole environment in which the human is embedded, the natural/physical milieu in which it "grows" and flourishes. The human being in *The Body Artist* is collapsed into, or conflated with, this environment as part of its overall, organic structure. *The Body Artist* is a paradigm of the open-system model that the human now is, which allows inputs and outputs with its environment in a continuous flow of nourishment (biological continuity) and an endless flux of information (everything else, such as sociality), discarding all boundaries of a closed, self-contained system. Lauren, who eventually assumes "a generic neutered human" voice (101), discards all individuality, idiosyncrasy and fixed representations (as Lauren Hartke) in a successive flow of mutations

during her body art performance in an effort to be oneness and all at the same time. Art, then, enables Lauren to survive the exigencies of her life (her husband's suicide and the ensuing grief) that she can not endure in her individuated, subjective existence as Lauren Hartke. *The Body Artist* is about the dissolution of time and space; its characters, Lauren and Mr. Tuttle, with their crushed individualities, live in a perennial present that is both past and future at the same time. All this is reflected in its language that resonates an autistic repetitiveness and involution, resembling a digital, pixelated discourse deprived of human agency.

*The Body Artist* is a minimalist work of art. It is minimal in its plot, minimal in its linguistic resources, minimal in its expression. Its plot is hardly an ordinary one befitting an ordinary story, accommodating our expectations. Nothing much really happens, except for a suicide that is left untold—a thing—(“This is a thing that was going to happen” (58)), nothing moves to a (re-)solution, because nothing is in need of one. *The Body Artist* is a work of silence and emptiness; its language is hollow, devoid of referential meaning, convoluted in its form as it reflects upon itself, and mostly self-representational.

DeLillo predicted the form of *The Body Artist* in a very early interview while referring to Ratner's *Star*: “I wanted the book to become what it was about. Abstract structures and connective patterns. A piece of mathematics in short. To do this, I felt I had to reduce the importance of people. The people had to play a role subservient to pattern, form, and so on” (LeClair, “An Interview” 27). The importance of people in the novel is indeed reduced as their subjectivity vanishes. What remains is the biological minimal but significant, transcendent essence of *The Body Artist* which is reflected in a minimalist transcendent logical (or linguistic) form of essence.

*The Body Artist* opens with two characters, a married couple, Rey and Lauren Hartke, going about their mundane, daily routine of having breakfast. This mundaneness is reflected in the bare, unadorned, repetitive language of the text. Conversation between them is scarce, thin and languid, and the narrator is invisible as even reporting verbs are down to, “he said,” “she said,” leaving it up to the reader to sense the question, the request, unease or hesitation, in short, to supply the tone and force of their utterances. In the same vein, the reader is not informed of the “why” of things as exposition remains mono-leveled (at a superficial level) and “because”-clauses either vacuously reflect upon themselves or do not resonate human reasoning: “She took the kettle back to the stove because this is how you live a life even if

you don't know it..." (12), "She used the old dented kettle instead of the new one she'd just bought because – she didn't know why" (13), "Lucky we don't normally have breakfast together. Because my mornings" (18), "This man hated who he was. Because how long do I know this man and how long do you know him? I never left" (59). In these examples, "because" does not connect a cause to an effect or reason or explanation or even justification to a state of affairs or to an action. Instead, it is used as a logical connective—i.e., in its merely connective function as a sign of plus—without any further semantic meaning intuiting an inferential process that would reveal human agency. This repetitive, self-reflexive language folds upon itself and resonates a pixelated cyber-discourse that has no agents to give it human perspective.

In like manner, the connectives "and" and "or," both used in a bare logical sense of addition, devoid of any inferential semantic enrichment, do not implicate human agency either. Just as in a logical, two-valued system, sustaining all digital discourse, so in *The Body Artist* alternativity is permissible, signaling that everything goes and everything can be connected rather than divided: She held the strand of hair between thumb and index finger, regarding it with mock aversion, or real aversion stretched to artistic limits... (11). She had a hyper-preparedness, or haywire, or hair-trigger, and Rey was always saying, or said once, and she carried a voice in her head that was hers and it was dialogue or monologue... (16).

Even the metatextual level, which is aligned with Lauren's point of view, is contaminated by this kind of promiscuity: "The lever sprang or sprung" (10). This kind of disjunction is conjunctive in essence. Everything is "something that is something else, but what, and what" (36) "both realities occurring at once" (39). Both disjuncts can be true, just as in a logical, two-valued system, where disjunction remains valid, true, undisrupted. Not so in human reasoning. In human reasoning, disjunction always signals alternativity: either one or the other can be true, but not both as is constantly the case in *The Body Artist*, where the sentence utilizing the conjunction "or" can be  $p$  or  $\sim p$  (not  $p$ ) [where  $p$  stands for a proposition] as in the following examples:

"[she] read some more or didn't" (23)

"and they come and peck, or don't" (53)

"Wakeful or not. Fairly neat or mostly unkempt. What else? Good, bad or indifferent night" (54).

"He ate breakfast, or didn't" (86).

"His clear or hazy meaning" (112).

Here we know that both things, even if contradictory, can exist at the same time. Such coexistence is what allows Lauren to transcend her devastating solitude by mutating into other lives. "Or you become someone else, one of the people in the story, doing dialogue of your own devising. You become a man at times, living between the lines, doing another version of the story" (20). This permissiveness of language resonates a promiscuity outside its limits, reminiscent of a pixelated, cyber-discourse rather than a human one.

This sense of alliance with everything, reflecting diffused subjectivity, and also reflected in the textuality of the novel as it is virtually compounded by the most fundamental logical conjunctions "and" and "or," resonating simple additivity and alternativity, respectively, is not the only way the novel builds on the idea of connection. Everything rolls into everything else in *The Body Artist* refusing the humanist insistence on separate identity boundaries. "Things she saw seemed doubtful—not doubtful but ever changing, plunged into metamorphosis, something that is also something else, but what and what" (36), constituting possibilities and dislodging human logic and reasoning as we have learned to practice it in our daily routines. Even when individuality is most pronounced, at the beginning of the novel, through personal pronouns that distinctly are meant to challenge any unseemly crossovers ("It was his coffee and his cup. They shared the newspaper but it was actually, unspokenly, hers" (8), "It was her newspaper. The telephone was his except when she was calling the weather. They both used the computer but it was spiritually hers" (12), Lauren echoes Rey, "groaning his groan, but in a manner so seamless and deep it was her discomfort too" (9) and "insert[s] herself into certain stories in the newspaper. Some kind of daydream variation" (14). It is this overlapping of subjectivities that causes Lauren pain for her husband's suicide for she is forced to relive the life she lived with him, but which also liberates her by allowing her to be less herself and thus more impervious to pain. When she loses part of herself with Rey gone, her only recourse to action is to relinquish any claim to any subjectivity at all by appropriating those of others.

Destroying or reinventing the subject has been one of the mainstays of the ethos associated with postmodernism. DeLillo has, from the beginning of his career, tested out Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity, and whether time and place are instrumental in fashioning character at all. In discussing "Coming Sun. Mon. Tues.," an early DeLillo short story, Osteen observes that "the story eschews character development for a studied objectivity and

neutrality; connects plot elements simply by ‘then’; remains vague about setting. . . . as if to portray the protagonists’ disjointed sense of time and causality” (441). Osteen refers to DeLillo’s indebtedness to director Godard who also “cuts out connectives and explanations” (442), with character not being the result of a recursive connection to the environment but that of a motioning forward with no regard to circumstance and reflection, one that creates depthless caricatures. A similar dispersal of subjectivity occurs in *The Names* where there is a proliferation of the conjunction “and.” Morris notes that “the ‘and’ inscribed so prominently in the text calls for a reading based on conjunction, one attentive to all the text” (126). A lack of causal connectives that would reflect causality and a proliferation of the quality of additivity then informs DeLillo’s work, who, in *The Body Artist*, does not simply challenge the notions of subjectivity and individual responsibility, as he did in his earlier work, but grinds this notion of subjectivity to its bare essence, not contingent upon representation.

So the language of *The Body Artist* is a language that connects rather than separates, as it reflects possibilities in the broader, universal discourse in which humans partake in some form or other. This connection is also enforced by the repetition present in the novel, which is of two kinds. It either resonates the past, “It took two flips to get the bread to go brown” (8), “You had to flip the thing twice to get the bread to toast properly” (44), or produces linguistic fragments as in autistic discourse (autistic people repeat the last fragment of other’s speech so that they can process it [echolalia]), “The white ones. But beyond the trees” [uttered by Lauren], “Beyond the trees” [uttered by Mr. Tuttle] (44) and, in another example, “If there is another language you speak,” she told him, “say some words.” Mr. Tuttle responds, “say some words,” to which Lauren comes back with “say some words. Doesn’t matter if I can’t understand,” only to be echoed by Mr. Tuttle, “Say some words to say some words” (55).

Repetition enhances the impression that the characters cannot be real people enacting unique instances of speech qua énonciations, (Benveniste 223-30), but rather use a very basic signal code. These characters use a barely semiotic language as they blurt out énoncés that get repeated throughout the novel. They are, therefore, not uniquely individuated as unrepeatably subjectivities, but are rather connected with a pre-linguistic and, hence, pre-social thread. This (pre-)linguistic or silent connection is enforced not only by human “matter” as with the passage of a hair (12), but also by the digital culture and discourse in which we exist or subsist—if not live—and

which sustains our immateriality. “Only connect” is the motto of advertising in our sociality, but this connection is ultimately sustained by our organic, biological connection that no dissolution of reality can erase.

Philip Nel taps into DeLillo’s preoccupation with language and outlines his attempt to “develop a modernism concerned with translating consciousness into words” (738). Nel infers from DeLillo’s work “the impossibility of ever attaining that ideal language which literally embodies the material world” and yet, as Nel puts it, “even attempts to create language as direct and as stripped of metaphor as possible . . . veer into metaphor” (739). But for Nel, DeLillo’s consciousness about language and its overriding power spends itself in the stylistic choices he makes. For us, DeLillo’s language, devoid of discursive markers goes beyond stylistic choices and enacts not only a “nonplace” but a breaking down of language that gives way to a commonplace, namely, human subjectivity shared by all. Cornel Bonca’s word, resonating Heidegger, for this commonplace is the “ontological,” which “emerges from a calculated withdrawal from the ontic—from the social self and its cultural manifestations” (65). It is this preoccupation with a bottom-line subjectivity that allows Bonca to call DeLillo an “[un]reliable postmodernist” (59).

## II

The breakdown of individuated subjectivity is commensurate with the dissolution of the concept of time as we know it. *The Body Artist* is not located in any specificity of time, and yet it is virtually enclosed in time. Even though there is “a reading of local time in the digital display in the corner of the screen” of the “live-streaming video” (38), this time indication does not situate Lauren in the here and now of Kotka but in a factuality that seems to be unchanging, unyielding to time as concept. And even though Lauren’s piece is called “Body Time” and she “wanted her audience to feel time go by, viscerally, even painfully” (104), it is this excessive stretching of time that negates the very idea of time, the same way that focusing on her body manages to shake off the body.

Time anchoring is very much dependent upon deictic elements and *The Body Artist* is a novel that ignores temporal deixis altogether. To Lauren’s deictic, temporal question, Mr. Tuttle responds with an adeictic, atemporal proposition signifying—if it even does that much—an eternal, and hence atemporal, nowness: “... When did you know him?” Lauren asks Mr.

Tuttle of Rey and he answers, "I know him where he was" (62), as if Rey is still around and Mr. Tuttle is in a position to still sense him around. "Then and now. Is that what you're saying? ..." (62), Lauren tries to clarify and make sense of his involuted speech, or what, in other words, Atchley calls a "stuttering" language (342). She is forced to linguisticize his speech (i.e., to deposit it in proper language), as it was "trapped in tenses and inflections, in singsong conjugations, and she became aware that she was describing what he said to some third person in her mind, . . ." (63). Tenses, just like pronouns, are deictic-anchoring elements grounding the event denoted by the predicate (verb, etc.) in the temporal axis. But in *The Body Artist* all deictic terms, or indexicals, lack reference and are thus turned upon themselves as hollow involuted signs.

The novel's opening line reads, "time seems to pass" (7) and its closing line couples this with "she wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was" (124). Both references refuse to locate the plot of the novel conventionally in a particular setting, as one would expect, but serve to accentuate a notion of individuality and subjectivity that needs pegging on the temporal axis: "You know more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness" (7). Time in *The Body Artist* is a subjectively entertained notion that is savoured in its course by the individual—"Time seems to pass," "Time is supposed to pass" (77, our emphasis)—rather than an external correlate immune to our subjective definitions. Both verbs (seems, is supposed) are propositional attitude verbs modalizing the proposition; in other words, such verbs signify the stance of the individual—the enunciator of the utterance—cast on his or her proposition, that is, on his or her enoncés. Such savouring of time may be all that is real in it, for the "true taste of time passing" is also the taste of the true, as Debord put it (qtd in Blanchard 235).

This refusal of external temporal anchorage also deprives the protagonists of a secure grounding in an outer world that would insulate their unique individualities. They move in a universal, perennially flowing, automated discourse that cannot be anchored to any specificity and, hence, individuality and uniqueness. Right from the beginning of the novel, the reader has the sense of being plunged into a perennial deferral of fixation that is never to come. Even when Lauren affirms her individuality against her husband's, she still lapses into other people's lives as she reads about them in the newspaper or looks into their mundane lives through the eyes

of the ever-present birds:

When birds look into houses, what impossible worlds they see. Think. What a shedding of every knowable surface and process. She wanted to believe the bird was seeing her, a woman with a teacup in her hand, and never mind the folding back of day and night, the apparition of a space set off from time. She looked and took a careful breath. She was alert to the clarity of the moment but knew it was ending already. She felt it in the blue jay. Or maybe not. (22) ...She sat over a bowl of cereal. She looked past the bowl into a space inside her head that was also here in front of her. ... She read and drifted. She was here and there. (23)

Lauren's presumed subjectivity has already collapsed into the environment. The disjunction between Lauren and her self is further intensified by her husband's death and the ensuing grief, causing her the acute but welcoming realization of the loss of her buffered subjectivity.

Lauren's guest, Mr. Tuttle, the baffling character—or rather a simulacrum of a character—that “violates the limits of the human” (100), speaks in other voices and comes from nowhere (has he escaped from an asylum or from cyberspace?), teases the reader's wits and secure commonsense assumptions, predominantly contributing to the novel's dismantling of the subject. Mr. Tuttle, is not inscribed in time, “the only narrative that matters” (92). “Who am I?” is commensurate to “Where am I?” but Mr. Tuttle cannot be placed in time. He has no origin—he was found on Lauren's bed—and no destination as he makes his way out of the novel in the same elusive and obscure way he was introduced, leaving Lauren “to wander the halls, missing him” (96). His language is closed in on itself, a typical function of social or mental impotence: “I said this what I said”, “Somehow. What is somehow?” (56). He “lives” in an evanescent nowness, not only in his speech, but also in his elusive existence as a duplicate of both Rey, who dies, and Lauren, who parades other individualities. Whatever dialogue there is in the novel between its characters is permeated by the simple present, which is not really a tense, that deictic element which pegs speech to a time and an outer reality or even constitutes this reality. The present simple lacks temporality as it does not reference outer facts but rather constitutes the phenomenon it speaks of. It is an atemporal description of an inner intentional, at best, condition of the agent that speaks it. As such, then, the present indicates a constant nowness incapable of referencing any outer, non-textual reality. The present simple is not a diagetetic tense creating a narrative, but rather a



textual correlate, as it functions in the frame of the text only, incapable of pointing to a definite unique outer time or discursive instance (See Bolinger, Moschonas). All in all, the language of the novel is devoid of the dynamics that would render it discourse, i.e., the enactment of language (Vološinov 68, 86 and *passim*, Benveniste 217-22).

Mr. Tuttle's atemporal consistency makes for his subjectlessness, for he is not "made out of time . . . that defines your existence" (92). When Lauren protests about Mr. Tuttle's possible resistance to time since "you [we] are made out of time. This is the force that tells you who you are" (92), attesting to the imperviousness of time, she does so not by providing a definition of time in terms of managing or gauging time but in terms of "clos[ing] your eyes and feel[ing] it" (92). Time is of the essence in the novel but it is not readily available to measurement.

The sense of subjectlessness is intensified by the fact that Mr. Tuttle has no language of his own, no origin and no destination, no identity and no subjectivity. He is "like a man anonymous to himself" (95). It is Lauren Hartke who gives him a name because "she thought it would make him easier to see" (48), easier to comprehend and make sense of. Not constituted by our representations, Mr. Tuttle is, therefore, difficult to place in a commonsense "reality" as we cognize it; "all happens around the word seem" (31). Lauren tries to make sense of Mr. Tuttle by placing him into firm representations he always eludes as he flows from one "as if" mode to the next, constantly alternating but hardly ever assuming stable representations. Such representations would enforce stable "as if" existence that would allay the fear of emptiness: "It was always as if. He did this or that as if. She needed a reference elsewhere to get him placed" (45). Mr. Tuttle escapes fixity as a subject, even if a represented one, just as a cyber-entity eludes permanency and stability, originality and duplicity. Just as in cyber discourse we do not know where the original lies for there is no such notion, but all is a repetition of a lost or never-has-been original, all is versions of itself in a flowing reproductive process that respects no subjecthood.

Mr. Tuttle appears to be a recycling of Philip Dick's autistic Manfred Steiner of *Martian Time-Slip*. Like Mr. Tuttle, Manfred is totally asocial, on the pre-rational, semiotic level, on a different time-scale to the other characters, "oriented according to a subjective factor that took precedence over his sense of objective reality" (61). His vision of the mangled world that surrounds him is conflated with the onomatopoeic word "gubble" the same way the word "tuttle" encapsulates the tattling effects of Mr. Tuttle's

speech. Like Mr. Tuttle, Manfred's world reflects the one around him. But while he ends up merging with this world like Mr. Tuttle, he sees only decay, degeneration and death, being the victim of his time ailment (Palmer 164), unlike Mr. Tuttle. Manfred Steiner epitomizes the subjective, what Palmer, following Kristeva, calls "the semiotic," (171) being unable to participate in the reality around him while Mr. Tuttle is no subject at all.

In his atavistic subsistence, Mr. Tuttle has "no protective surface" (90) to secure himself behind, no secure representations to shield him from the poignant unreality of our existence, no secure "as if" existence to carry him through: "He was here in the howl of the world. This was the howling face, the stark, the not-as-if of things" (90). But his state is beyond Lauren's comprehension: "But how could she know this? She could not" (90). And yet she does know and indeed manages to impart this to the readers albeit by sweeping "aside words" (90), in keeping with the general practice of the novel which presents a verbally minimalistic world. Mr. Tuttle is then the postmodernist subject that is no subject at all, but rather, according to Burgin, "a precipitate of the very symbolic order of which the humanist subject supposed itself to be the master" (49). Mr. Tuttle is the very biological residue of our bare existence that has to assume roles in "as if" representations. He has to be named, placed in space and time and made reference of, if he is to appropriate a represented identity. He has to have some simulation of origin and end, if he is to pretend to have a language—rather than be the effect of one, as he now is in his autistic behavior.

In contemplating Mr. Tuttle's relationship to time, "his future is unnamed. It is simultaneous, somehow, with the present. Neither happens before or after the other and they are equally accessible, perhaps, if only in his mind" (77), Lauren echoes Deleuze and Parnet's idea that "he is no more than an abstract line, a pure movement difficult to discover; he never begins, but takes up things in the middle; he is always in the middle" (75-6). Mr. Tuttle in effect dissolves the binarism of "he" vs "she," of "male" vs "female," of "a" as distinct from "b," a binarism that individuates Rey and Lauren into their distinct, even if precarious, subjectivities. But if he effects this dissolution of rigid segmentation, he is both "a" and "b," both "he" and "she," uniting them on a continuum of fused subjectivity, common memory and shared biological constitution. Mr. Tuttle connects them both on the most basic level of existence, that of common memory or history, that of the continued flow of existence, as he repeats their utterances, thus uniting them both in a shared consciousness. But this shared consciousness extends

beyond them over to others via Lauren, who through her art performance transverses other individualities in a continuous flow of mutations. This continuity is what eventually saves her and enables her to search afresh for her subjectivity. But just as consciousness cannot be located in any one single place in the brain, so, too, it is not locatable in any individual uniquely but connects human existence as a whole.

### III

Not only does Mr. Tuttle not understand time and language but he also seems to have a problematic relationship with his body, whose everyday functions, like bowel movements, he seems to ignore. We can almost say then that he lacks a body because a body is to be tied to a certain world, because a body must not just be placed in space, but be of it (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*). So he lacks individuality and he also lacks a consciousness, both socially constructed (Vološinov 12). He is an asocial being predating our socially constituted individuality and consciousness, reminiscent of humans but also of biological machines. He is a humanoid with an autistic behavior and speech, which forces Lauren to cry out in exasperation, “All right. Be a Zen master, you little creep” (55). He is an android-humanoid, resonating his environment (Rey and Lauren) but also reflecting back on himself as he cannot reach out to his environment effectively except through receptive Lauren, who, in her more lucid moments, attempts to theorize sensibly about who her guest might be: “If you examine the matter methodically, you realize that he is a retarded man sadly gifted in certain specialized areas, such as memory retention and mimicry, a man who’d been concealed in a large house, listening” (100). Mr. Tuttle inhabits “another planet,” what Philip Nel calls a “nonplace” (746), as he is devoid of sociality and functionality, devoid of effective communicative speech and a consciousness even though he is a very basic biological being living “in overlapping realities” (82), with human attributes on loan (Rey’s speech).

Mr. Tuttle constitutes a “rhizome” in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of philosophy or Guattari’s chaosophy.

A rhizome doesn’t begin and doesn’t end, but is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, exclusively alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the rhizome is woven together with conjunctions: “and...

and... and..." In this conjunction there is enough force to shake up and uproot the verb "to be." Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you driving at? All useless questions. To make a clean slate of it, to start over and over again at zero, to look for a beginning or a foundation—all imply a false conception of voyage and movement. (Deleuze and Guattari 57-58)

In its thinness of plot and its absence of secure temporal and spatial placement, *The Body Artist* is also an "intermezzo" without a beginning and an end, just as Mr. Tuttle lacks a beginning and an end. He just "happens" between things; he shares Rey's and Lauren's subjectivities collapsing their individualities but mostly inter-connecting them in a shared sense of being, in the same memory of being; he comes and goes without the possibility of our tracing him to an origin in his bio-history, without witnessing his end, if indeed there is one. Mr. Tuttle very much "happens" in the middle of the novel, as indeed the novel itself happens somewhere that could be anywhere, sometime that could be anytime. It is in the middle of things without an origin and a secure end, as it is not anchored by any temporal specificity. "Maybe this man," we are told about Mr. Tuttle, "experiences another kind of reality where he is here and there, before and after, and he moves from one to the other shatteringly, in a state of collapse, minus an identity, a language, a way to enjoy the savour of the honey-coated toast she watches him eat" (64-65).

Mr. Tuttle is, then, neither a human, nor a machine, even though he behaves like a recorder, blurting out what he has heard or hears and mimicking what activity surrounds him as if he is the posthuman paradigm in the aftermath of the dissolution of all material reality or a cyborg that has been necessitated by advances in cybernetics. Is he the posthuman machine devoid of all that constitutes humanity, intelligence as we know it, sociality as we enact it, language as we perform in it? DeLillo plays with this notion of the cyborg only to subvert the very idea once the reader is settled with it. We feel somehow that Mr. Tuttle is not a subhuman machine but transcends human nature in its most essential characteristics, its ubiquity, inviolability, resilience and continuity. Mr. Tuttle is not an empty human simulacrum, he does not portray an endless simulation of emptiness, neither is he the expression of transcendent void, but is rather a flowing repetition of essence, be it human essence or biological essence. In *The Body Artist* the two attributes seem to merge in what is most transcendental in human nature

when it is devoid of its sociality and representations. Even if Mr. Tuttle reminds us of a digital homilacrum, his organicist constitution is mutated eventually to Lauren's many transmutations when he is gone. He is grafted onto Lauren's newly acquired ability to get down to the essence of existence, working off all that is transient and alternating between representations in a chameleonic fashion. Lauren's final art performance is imbued with Mr. Tuttle's resonance. Mr. Tuttle and Lauren have now become a rhizome assuring Deleuze and Guattari's inter-de/reterritorialization of the other, very much in keeping with Baker's comment that "in DeLillo's novels characters seem to merge into one another; they can become almost indistinguishable in the course of a short dialogue" (101).

Anticipating her colonization of other subjectivities, Rey calls Lauren "the young woman who eats and sleeps and lives forever" (15). The theme of overall connection is prominent from the beginning, then, when we are at least temporarily assured that the two characters, Rey and Lauren, sport their distinct subjectivities. Very soon, we will read that Lauren's subjectivity lapses into otherness, an otherness which is not distinguishable, but which connects her with everything else: "Her body felt different to her in ways she did not understand. Tight, framed, she didn't know exactly. Slightly foreign and unfamiliar. Different, thinner, didn't matter" (33).

The characters, then, metamorphose into agonists who, failing to communicate in the scarce, logical thinness of their language, assume their inter-connecting subjectivities in their bodily forms on the biological plane. After all, "there's nothing like a raging crap, she [Lauren] thought, to make mind and body one" (35); for the meaning she was after was "so thin she could not read it. There were too many things to understand and finally just one" (35).

DeLillo's *The Body Artist* dissolves all barriers between the self and the other, an independent consciousness and the body it may inhabit. Mr. Tuttle emerges as a biological vessel devoid of emotions and mental states as we understand them and connect them to a mind and consciousness. Mr. Tuttle is emotionally desolate. Even Lauren is not immune to this emotional desolation (which helps her to survive her husband's death) since, under Mr. Tuttle's influence, she struggles to shed any personalizing layers that constitute her subjectivity as she has experienced it in her former life. Lauren, in effect, becomes depersonalized in a way ("Sink lower, she thought. Let it bring you down. Go where it takes you" (116)), consciously reducing herself to the most essential ingredient of her existence, to a "thinness of

address” that has to be biological and organic since she can be many things at the same time or successively, until she is less herself: “I am Lauren. But less and less” (117).

The barriers between herself and others are dissolved as if consciousness is a matter of matter and as if those barriers between the self and the other were totally arbitrary. Mental illness has indeed taught us that they are both arbitrary and precarious. Mr. Tuttle has lost the will to will, the will to be an agent as in mental illness and his perception of time is questionable. Such absence of a sense of coherence points to an immobilized, almost pro-thanatic self. And yet the sense of embodiment is never absent even in the absence of time continuity and action. All this is self constituting subjectivity, which needs movement that can be dissolved into its biological organic rudiments—as in mental illness—and one which does not vanish as if it were a mental apparition possessing its own independent constitution. All this is self for as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “I am no longer concerned with my body, nor with time, nor with the world, as I experience them in antepredicative knowledge, in the inner communion that I have with them” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 71).

#### IV

If, then, consciousness is a matter of matter, so is the sense of selfhood and subjectivity, both pseudo-epiphenomena on the unfailing, indisputable, sturdy, biological substance; both can be reduced to their organic nature and constitution as they do in Mr. Tuttle and later in Lauren. However, both selfhood and its accompanying sense of subjectivity do not vanish, but are rather deferred and made sense of at this other most essential level of organic substance that is the immutable real and transcendental true. After all, individuality is a purely social-ideological phenomenon and the individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact (Vološinov 12).

Even if there is no fixed center but fluidity in *The Body Artist*, it is this biological essentialism of organic matter, not just contingent but real in a sense, that flows across, leaving no traces or duplicates or images of itself in its passage, but only its actual holistic undifferentiated substance, whether in thinner or thicker form, that spans various formulations, supposedly uniquely individuated, but, in effect, undifferentiated or bound as beads by the same biological thread. Lauren’s art eloquently proves this point. There is no transcendence of the body, then,—why should there be? “The body has never been my enemy” (105), Lauren declares—but a redirection

to the immanence of the biological element in our human existence, when we are “stripped of recognizable language and culture” (107). It is through embodiment that we come to know the world (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Signs). Human beings are united in a universal consciousness made of our common memories, united in the language that defines them (“People saying the same thing” [99]), and just as the sign is a perennial continuity marked by “arbitrary divisions” (91), so, too, humans form a continuity marked by arbitrary individuations. Fixity in biological substance is an irrelevant human construct, as Lauren so poignantly shows us, just as fixity in language is a myth: “Somehow. The weakest word in the language. And more or less. And maybe. Always maybe. She was always maybeing,” (92) enabling her to survive her solitude, “create her future” (98) and regenerate into a fresh subjectivity, to be redefined “in time in her body, to tell her who she was” (124).

The whole novel centers on Lauren’s body art performance, mediated—or rather enlightened—by Mr. Tuttle’s “interference.” What is communicated in and by Lauren’s body art needs no words, no linguistic wrapping or trappings; it is a performance within a society of generalized communication (Vattimo 24-5). DeLillo concentrates on Mr. Tuttle and his primitive, pre-human, pre-linguistic, atemporal and spaceless constitution. It may be that *The Body Artist* views the human element (hark! “element”) as a “component” within the larger biological “system,” a molecular constitution that is allied with the overall biological eco-system, just as in General Systems Theory we try to make sense of the world within a general systems framework. Even if humans are wired on the same circuit, all connecting our supposedly unique individualities to the same outer-controlled system of perennial repetitions, with our subjectivities naturalized, even if we mistake what is its representation for what is real, even if the real has vanished with our blissful naivety and newly-acquired wisdom, what still remains is the biological substratum as the source of all human potency. Even if we now live in a “techno-nature” that has alienated the human element from what was not uncanny, but congenial to it, nature’s force can still penetrate and survive all appropriations. It may be that this biological force can recapture and naturalize what has been usurped from it, just as Lauren accesses new realities via her body transformations: “In a series of electro-convulsive motions the body flails out of control, whipping and spinning appallingly. Hartke makes her body do things I’ve only seen in animated cartoons. It is a seizure that apparently flies the man out of one reality and into another” (108).

Art, then, is a “being in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed . . . It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art” (Merleau-Ponty *The Phenomenology of Perception* 151). Lauren’s body is both the medium and the subject of her art. It epitomizes the persistent inseparability of art and life, of life through art, an art physically located in the body, and worked by the human element lodged in the body that cannot—and will not—be shed, a body that will not surrender to bleaching and annihilation, a body that resists the immateriality of reality. This body, Lauren’s body, mutated to her from Mr. Tuttle, is the centripetal locus of all evanescent, material reality, an affirmation of reality and a positive negation of an excruciating immateriality. Lauren’s progressive efforts towards her self-inflicted dissolution attest to this resistance to immateriality, an immateriality that is brought about by the ubiquity of the same, by the endless replicas of a lost original, by a cascade of simulacra whose origin is lost in time and space.

Baudrillard claims that the individuated beings that we have become are in fact a promiscuous contagion, undifferentiated in ourselves and from each other, and, in accordance with DeLillo criticism, also undifferentiated from the culture of consumerism that produces us (Baker 82). Lauren resists the habituation to representation that glorifies this contagion. Instead, DeLillo depicts the inescapability of this almost physical continuity and contagiousness that neither duplicates beings or images, nor unites them, but rather affirms this one biological being or super organism of whose molecular constitution the human being is just one component part. In *The Body Artist* we have no “umbilicus of limbs” (Baudrillard 482), but rather an umbilicus of organic substance barely formulated into a human limb, more like the main ingredient of the irresistible perennial human essence, which is biological, lymphatic, rather than mental.

We witness human resilience, then, in the form of a biological, organic resistance to all cloning, social or mental, cultural or intellectual, that can in effect resist all promiscuity produced by “mental involution” or “social implosion” or even “on-line interaction,” as Baudrillard (482) describes this promiscuity. This connection across bodies provides a link with the typical schismatic DeLillian criticism of earlier DeLillo novels that walked a tightrope between a postmodernist stance and a lurking modernism (Baker, Cantor, Carmichael, Lentricchia, Nel) as Laura Martin also so painstakingly documents. Most critics seem to agree that DeLillo’s janus-faced attitude straddles both –isms. He uses postmodernist concerns to a modernist end.



Frank Lentricchia calls DeLillo the “last of the modernists,” one “who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation,” (14) where creative art is foregrounded and the opaqueness of the text propagates surface. The very engagement with the idea of art as “specially endowed revelation” (Wilcox 348) gives DeLillo his modernist leanings in *The Body Artist*, which is DeLillo’s only novel where “aesthetic creativity . . . is [not] shown to be absorbed into a culture of consumerism” as was true, according to Baker, for DeLillo’s other novels (82). DeLillo seems to live in the interstices between the symbolism of Being and the trauma of being, between modernist high aestheticism and postmodernist techno-aestheticism. Modernism is premised on the mode of subjectivity and DeLillo does indeed engage with the fragmentation of subjectivity characteristic of modernism. One can even say that his modernist leanings in this novel can be traced through the indisputable, inviolable and invincible connective tissue of human substance. Yet it is an organic, biological ingredient to which his human existence refers. His engagement with biological subjectivity is what makes DeLillo a full-blown postmodernist. After all, DeLillo has forged a corporeal language and his art is sensational and explicitly physical.

DeLillo’s postmodernism has created a body stripped of all the accoutrements of representation, devoid of the representational mirror that gives back to the world a meaning, dissected and analyzed. His postmodernism conveys a perspective of undifferentiated sameness uniting human substance, with humanity appearing as dots against a pixelated panel, very much “the little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern” as the character Murray Siskind puts it in *White Noise* (51). Even though DeLillo can see little else than this persistent and expanding organic substance as the essence of the human being and even though the reader is seduced into believing that this is one more novel about vacuity and assembly line existence, s/he discovers that the reduction posited leads not to nullity but to a core of sheer being. Cowart notes that “DeLillo’s engagement with the postmodern . . . at least as it is commonly defined, is or has come to be adversarial” (210). Cantor believes that “DeLillo is sufficiently distanced from postmodern existence to want to be able to criticize it, but sufficiently implicated in it to have a hard time finding an Archimedean point from which to do the criticising” (60). This may be true for most of DeLillo’s novels but not for *The Body Artist*. In *Introducing Merleau-Ponty’s Signs*, McCleary draws attention to the fact that, “as the body’s self-awareness as projecting project of the world, consciousness is basically the anonymous, pre-personal life of the

flesh. Carnal self-awareness is the Archimedean point of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy" (xvii). In like manner, Lauren has to reduce herself to non-existence to reach the palpitating life force that can never be erased. The novel pays tribute to this life force that cannot and will not be stamped out.

DeLillo's *The Body Artist* stresses the inviolable real of biology that escapes all contingencies and acts as the potential for all social, cultural or mental transmutations (if the mental, indeed, exists). It seems that the human element thrives on this organic matter which is stripped of all cultural, social and mental overlays even though there is no definitive answer as to whether it is a source of "jouissance" or despair. It could very well be that DeLillo wrote *The Body Artist* as an elegy to the most essential in life that enables us to be human, to this ever-lasting unfailing, organic matter that enables us to aspire to be more than human, the attribute par excellence that makes us uniquely human (Ramachandran). After all, "the mind lags behind nature," as Deleuze and Guattari (6) proclaim.

Whatever significance the novel may lay claim to has to be worked out in collaboration, collusion or even collision with the reader and his or her own perceptions, conceptions, and sensibilities. Like all minimalist works of art, *The Body Artist*, despite its cerebral character, is a profoundly and inescapably interactive piece of work, its interactivity enforced and foregrounded by its minimalist language. Just as interactivity is forced on the spectator of a work of art by empty space, as, for example, by a white unpainted canvas in a painting, so, too, in *The Body Artist*, language, with its paucity of expression and incompleteness of form, becomes the locus of reader engagement and interactivity. The reader of *The Body Artist* is in part an artist him/herself, as the novel does not have an independent life of its own, a fact that may be true to a very considerable extent of all works of art. Its artistry is partly due to the destabilization experienced by the reader, not so much by the plot or its thinness, if not its total absence, but rather by the alienating effect of DeLillo's language. But, despite its alienating tone, its language is sheer poetry that makes the reader feel pain in his/her existence. The language of *The Body Artist* hurts and the reader plunges into uncertainty as s/he is invited to a near-simulated authorship, having to interact with the novel's "thinness of address." Since the language of *The Body Artist* is not just elliptical, but also turned in upon itself, it can be unfolded to be made sense of in unpredictable ways. Messages and meanings derived from this convoluted, self-umbilicalled language can be varied, resonating the reader's sensibilities and bio-histories. The paradox

of this self-reflexive text echoing the reader's concerns is accentuated by the fact that we, just as Lauren does, would like, at times, to dismantle any sense of "normative" time by which we are engulfed. One thing is certain, that "we're caught in time" (Laurie Anderson) and we try to make sense out of our entrapment even by negating our very subjectivity.

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