

Exploring the Limitations and Ethical Implications of Posthumanism in Don DeLillo's *Zero K* and *The Silence*

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Abstract

Posthumanism is a philosophical and cultural movement that seeks to transcend traditional humanist perspectives on what it means to be human. This paper examines the limitations of posthumanism as portrayed in the novels *Zero K* and *The Silence* by Don DeLillo. Through a close analysis of these texts, this paper argues that posthumanism's emphasis on the transcendence of the human body and mind ultimately neglects the complex, embodied realities of human existence. While the novels explore the potential benefits of posthumanism, they also caution against its dangers, suggesting that the path to a posthuman future is fraught with ethical and existential challenges.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Embodiment, Humanism, Ethics

Introduction

Posthumanism is a notion that has gained traction in recent years, notably in science fiction and cultural studies. Posthumanism questions traditional concepts of human identity by claiming that the distinctions between human and machine, or human and animal, are becoming increasingly blurred. Posthumanism is a theoretical paradigm that claims that humans are not the only subjects of agency, and that other phenomena such as technology and the environment have agency as well. Yet, like with any novel notion, posthumanism has limits that must be explored in order to properly realise its implications for our understanding of human identity and the human condition.

Don DeLillo's work *Zero K* tackles posthumanist ideas by suggesting cryogenic immortality as a possibility. It also attacks posthumanism for failing to give a complete grasp of the human condition and the ethical consequences of technology. *The Silence* maintains that while posthumanism promises emancipation from the restrictions of the human body, it ultimately fails to account for the intricacies of the human experience. The plot centres around a group of individuals who are stuck aboard an aircraft amid a global blackout. As they try to survive in the

dark, they face their own mortality and the limitations of their humanity.

Human Exceptionalism is Challenged by Posthumanism

Posthumanism challenges the notion of human exceptionalism. The character Jeffrey Lockhart in the novel *Zero K* wrestles with the concept of immortality and questions its meaning. Jeffrey's father, Ross Lockhart, is a wealthy man who decides to undergo cryogenic freezing in the hopes of achieving immortality. He is inspired by his wife Artis' terminal illness to seek immortality for both of them through cryopreservation.

Jeffrey is tasked with accompanying his father to the cryogenic facility, where he meets a group of people who have also decided to go through with the procedure. In the context of immortality, the novel also questions the concept of individual identity and the meaning of life. Jeffrey is concerned about losing his individuality and becoming a part of a collective consciousness. This begs the question of the nature of identity and the purpose of life. According to this critique, posthumanism's emphasis on interconnectedness must be balanced with a

consideration of the significance of individual identity and the meaning of life.

"The promise of singularity, immortality, coming to know the godlike and eventually merging with it, runs up against the rock of a single mortality, the fear and pain and confusion of one brief life." (DeLillo 47). This line emphasizes the limitations of posthumanism in providing a comprehensive understanding of the human condition. It suggests that the pursuit of immortality through technology runs counter to the fear and pain that are inherent in the human experience.

Posthumanism's Limitations in Providing a Comprehensive Understanding of the Human Experience

The novel depicts a dystopian future in which mankind has ceded agency to technology in the search of immortality. The cryogenic facility featured in the novel raises ethical concerns regarding the use of technology to extend human life. The novel's protagonists dispute the morality of cryogenic freezing and its influence on the environment. This demonstrates posthumanism's shortcomings in giving a full grasp of the ethical consequences of technology. This implies that posthumanism's emphasis on interconnection must be matched with an ethical evaluation of the influence of technology on the human experience.

"They want to turn death into a practical problem, something that can be solved, as if they can replace the mystery and miracle of a person's life with a mathematical equation." (DeLillo 40).

It also suggests that the pursuit of immortality through technology is an attempt to replace the human condition with something more efficient. "the human condition with something better, something more efficient" (DeLillo 38). The critique shows posthumanism's inadequacies in offering a full account of human experience. It implies that the quest of immortality through technology may result in the loss of distinctive characteristics of human existence, such as the sensation of mortality and the sense of purpose that comes from living a finite life.

Posthumanism's Limitations in Providing a Comprehensive Understanding of Technology's Impact on the Environment

Additionally, the novel illustrates the limits of posthumanism in offering a thorough grasp of the influence of technology on the environment. The novel's cryogenic facility is characterised as sterile and artificial, and it is located in a distant part of Kazakhstan. This raises concerns about the environmental impact of technology and implies that posthumanism's emphasis on interconnection has to be tempered with an environmental awareness of the influence of technology. "The vast complex is a sort of ecological bubble. It draws power from the grid and maintains its own climate and life-support systems." (DeLillo 23). This comment emphasises the cryogenic facility's artificiality as well as the potential environmental impact of technology. Zero K also calls into question the idea that technology can alleviate the problems of human mortality and sorrow. The cryogenic facility is described in the tale as a sterile and artificial environment devoid of any true human connection or feeling. Jeffrey's wish to undergo the cryogenic process is ultimately a futile attempt to avoid his own mortality and the sadness of his wife's death. According to the novel, while posthumanism promises immortality, it cannot alleviate the fundamental problem of human unhappiness. "He wants to avoid the mess of dying and he doesn't know what he's doing, doesn't know what he's asking for" (DeLillo 100).

The Silence exposes the limitations of posthumanism in providing a comprehensive understanding of the human condition.

Limitations of Posthumanism in The Silence

The Silence presents a world in which technology offers the promise of transcendence from the limitations of the human body. "We are becoming posthuman. We are losing the ability to be fully human" (DeLillo 9). This sentence implies that posthumanism provides the prospect of a new type of identity that transcends the constraints of the human body. The story, however, highlights the limitations of this viewpoint by revealing the intricacies of human experience that technology cannot entirely convey.

Jim Kripps, a former astronaut, is one character in the story who tries to transcend his humanity through technology. Kripps is concerned with the concept of using technology to transcend the constraints of the human body and achieve a new type of identity. He has had a series of procedures to improve his physical skills and is now preparing to have a treatment that will allow him to interact with his wife telepathically. Nevertheless, Kripps' desire for transcendence leads to his own demise. In a moment of despair, he commits suicide by jumping out a window, but his heightened physical talents save him from falling. The novel implies that Kripps' concern with transcending his humanity has caused him to lose sight of the relevance of his own existence and human connection.

"I wanted to explore the place where technology and the human meet" (DeLillo 56). This line suggests that the novel is concerned with the intersection of technology and human identity. However, the novel also suggests that this intersection is fraught with complexity and ambiguity. While technology offers the promise of transcendence, it also has the potential to alienate us from our own humanity and the value of human connection.

Another character in the novel who seeks to transcend his humanity through technology is Tessa Berens, a linguist who is attempting to create a universal language that will transcend cultural and linguistic barriers. However, Tessa's quest for transcendence is ultimately unsuccessful. The novel suggests that the complexities of human language and the cultural differences that shape our understanding of language make it impossible to create a universal language that can fully capture the nuances of the human experience.

In addition to these limitations, *The Silence* also exposes posthumanism's shortcomings in accounting for the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the human experience. While posthumanism promises liberation from the constraints of the human body, it fails to account for the complexities and richness of human emotion and spirituality. As the novel's characters face their own mortality and the fragility of their existence, they are forced to confront the fundamental questions of human existence: the nature of love, the meaning of life, and the nature of human consciousness. "We are thrown back upon

ourselves, upon the things we truly know, the things that are the most real to us" (DeLillo 108). This line suggests that when confronted with the limitations of our existence, we are forced to confront the fundamental questions of human existence that cannot be fully captured by technology.

Implications for our Understanding of Human Identity

The Silence exposes the limitations of posthumanism, which have profound ramifications for our understanding of human identity and the human experience. While posthumanism promises liberation from the constraints of the human body, it fails to account for the complexities and depth of the human experience. According to the novel, human identity involves more than just transcending our physical constraints; it also necessitates a deep connection with the emotional and spiritual components of the human experience.

Additionally, the novel implies that technology is incapable of properly capturing the complexity of human experience. While technology promises transcendence, it also has the capacity to distance us from our humanity and the significance of personal connection.

Conclusion

Summing up, Don DeLillo's work *Zero K* addresses posthumanist issues by offering cryogenic immortality as a possibility. The novel criticises posthumanism by highlighting its shortcomings in offering a full knowledge of the human experience and the ethical consequences of technology. The novel's critique of human uniqueness, individual identity, agency and free will, and the influence of technology on the environment highlight the limitations of posthumanism. While posthumanism challenges human exceptionalism, the book contends that it falls short of offering a thorough understanding of the human experience and the ethical consequences of technology. By presenting a world in which technology offers the possibility of immortality, the novel asks readers to consider the implications of this pursuit and the impact it may have on our understanding of what it means to be human. *The Silence* is a deep investigation of posthumanism's limits in offering a full understanding of

the human predicament. This thesis argues, via a thorough reading of the novel, that while posthumanism promises transcendence from the constraints of the human body, it ultimately fails to account for the depth and variety of the human experience. According to the novel, human identity is primarily relational and necessitates a close relationship with other people. The Silence exposes the limitations of posthumanism, which have enormous consequences for our understanding of human identity and the human condition, and it is crucial to continue to examine these implications as we wrestle with the interaction between technology and human identity.

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