

# explorations



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## The Return of the Sublime and the Transcendental in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*

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**Abstract.** This article focuses on the sublime experience in Don DeLillo's recent novel *Zero K*, framing it as a return, via sublime, to a possible, albeit vicarious, experience of the transcendental. General consensus on the sublime gravitates towards awe and terror upon encountering phenomena that overwhelm the mind, forcing it to become conscious of its limits. However, postmodern theory has largely departed from the idea of the transcendental in the sublime, focusing instead on the failure of representation itself. Don DeLillo's novels often problematize this very failure. In *Zero K* he has arguably reinjected the possibility of the transcendental into the idea of the sublime. Despite main protagonist Jeffrey Lockhart's various doubts, his visit to the Convergence – a cutting-edge cryonic facility, designed to emphasize the spiritual and religious side of an experiment with immortality – proves solemn and awe-inspiring, and he is overwhelmed by the project's ingenuity, massiveness, and all-encompassing spiritual atmosphere.

**Key words:** Don DeLillo, postmodernism, American fiction, sublime theory, technology

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Exploring the intricacies of the media-saturated postmodern social reality, Don DeLillo's novels often focus on the omnipresence of technology (Behrooz and Pirnajmuddin, 2018, 177). Thematically recurrent in his novels are “signs without meaning, simulations without originality, and information technologies that have radically changed contemporary life” (2018, 177). The characters are often thinkers and wanderers, trying to understand the new, complex reality, and find meaning in forces which – to evoke Lyotard (1984, XXIV) – have put pressure on our understanding of knowledge and truth, i.e. to read the ambiguities in aspects of life left blurred by postmodern reality.

However, the writer's vision of postmodern America is much more nuanced. Harold Bloom argued that "DeLillo, who is so easily mistaken for a Post-Modernist End-Gamer, is rather clearly a visionary, a late Emersonian American Romantic" (2003, 3). The signs of this sentiment might be found in DeLillo's characters' habit of searching for the mysterious and the spiritual. Even in a world steeped in a flow of meaningless information and overwhelming power of technology – DeLillo seems to argue – there is still hope of finding a more fulfilling experience. Unsurprisingly, then, his characters often encounter objects and phenomena that summon the feeling of the sublime, which opens the way to the hypothetically transcendental.

Thus it could be argued that it undermines a large part of postmodern theory, which leaves no space for divine or spiritual experience in a world of empty signs and ambiguities. After all, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson characterized the key term through its rejection of systemic philosophies, and its emphasis on the power of arbitrariness and artificiality (quoted in Shaw 2017, 167). Consequently, the postmodern version of the sublime, while it "retains the Romantic feeling for the vast and the unlimited, [it] no longer seeks to temper this feeling through reference to a higher faculty" (Shaw 2017, 167). There is no road towards enlightenment; instead, the new postmodern sublime focuses on the failure of representation.

In DeLillo's novels there is a tendency to explore the idea of the postmodern sublime and the rejection of the transcendental. In *White Noise* (1985), for instance, Jack Gladney engages in a discussion with a nun, who paradoxically objects to the existence of God and the miracles. However, in the same novel, Gladney and his family encounter the so-called 'airborne toxic event' – a massive cloud – that suggests the experience of the transcendental. In *End Zone* (1986), the main protagonist, Gary Harkness, is both fascinated and frightened by the strangely alluring quality of nuclear disasters. Similarly, in *Mao II* (1991), Brita is mesmerized by TV footage of trampled crowds and mass hysteria. *Cosmopolis* (2003) presents a world drowned in technology and capital; Eric Packer is so 'connected' that technology becomes yet another sense for him, the material and the digital world overlapping. Each time he notices this connection, he is struck with astonishment.

In this article, however, I shall argue that in one of the more recent novels, *Zero K* (2016), DeLillo returns to the idea of the sublime as, in fact, leading towards the transcendental. The concepts proposed by Romantic and postmodern thinkers are thus linked, creating a new way to experience the sublime: by encountering technology, the nature of which, paradoxically, approximates the divine. This leads the main character to not only experience a unique mixture of awe and terror, but also to realize that a space reaching beyond the material plane might exist. Nevertheless, this hypothetical realm does not stand in opposition to the rational; rather, it marks the limits of reason, indicating that such space cannot be accurately understood by the human mind. As a result, DeLillo locates the possibility for the transcendental within postmodern reality, from which it seems to have been firmly excluded.

## 2. THE THEORY OF THE SUBLIME

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke speaks of “[t]he passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully in astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (1990, 73). The sublime, in short, is a feeling of profound shock and fear that overcomes the viewer when they are a witness to a natural object that possesses certain awe-inspiring qualities. According to Burke’s theory, certain describable traits lead to the emergence of this sensation: qualities such as obscurity, power, magnitude, light, and silence, or conversely, loud sounds (1990, 73-122). After Burke, the theory of the sublime was developed, among others, by Immanuel Kant. One of the most influential proponents of the theory, Kant offered the following examples of awe-inspiring Nature: “[B]old, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall on a mighty river, and so on” (1987, 120).

Furthermore, Kant offers a helpful division of the sublime into the mathematical and the dynamic variety. The first category refers to unimaginably vast objects, such as a massive mountain range, or an ocean stretching as far as the eye can see. The second category covers objects or events that are terrifying spectacles of power: thus, a great thunderstorm or a volcanic eruption would be examples of the dynamic sublime. However, to appreciate these dangerous phenomena as sublime, the viewer needs to locate themselves at a safe distance (1987, 120). Moreover, in contrast to Burke, Kant emphasizes that it is not the object itself that is sublime; instead, the feeling is created in the mind of the observer. In *The Sublime*, Philip Shaw explains Kant’s reasoning in the following way: “In a judgment of taste, therefore it is not the object itself that is beautiful but the manner in which the mind apprehends that object, manifesting its accordance with an indeterminate concept of understanding. Like the beautiful, therefore, the sublime is not a property of nature” (1987, 101). In other words, it is the mind that holds the power to perceive specific phenomena or objects as sublime; it is there that “the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated” (Shaw 2017, 3).

This is perhaps why sublime theory eventually reached beyond the consideration of the wonders of nature, towards art and other man-made structures and systems. Joseph Tabbi defines this new technological sublime in his *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* as “a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology, a complex pleasure derived from the pain of representational insufficiency” (1996, 1). The sublime could be experienced through the intricacies of complex information systems, but also through more direct confrontation with awe-inspiring feats of engineering. In *American Technological Sublime* (1994), for instance, contemporary scholar David Nye describes San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, opened in 1937, as a “magnificent piece of civil engineering [which] cannot be comprehended through words and images alone. When visited, it outstrips expectations” (1994, XI). According to Nye, its effect at the time matched the definition of the sublime, in that the observer was forced to struggle mentally with an astonishing sight that escaped the mind’s reasoning (1994, 15-16).

In all of the presented examples of sublime phenomena there is an underlying aspect of the transcendental. According to Shaw, the sublime is the moment where the mind acknowledges its own limits (2017, 2), suggesting something which exists outside the known reality. This explains why those overwhelmed by the sublime often resort to religious language to attempt to express what they have undergone (Nye 1994, 21-22). For example, Edwin Stanley describes his experience of seeing the Yellowstone canyon thus: “We were awed into silence and reverence, feeling that we were in the very antechamber of the great God of Nature, and that he was talking to us and teaching us lessons of his greatness, his grandeur, and his glory” (2010, 77-78).

However, Shaw comments that it is exceedingly rare to encounter the transcendental in the modern world. Due to technological developments, spread of the media, and progressing secularization, we no longer partake in the spiritual aspect of the sublime (2017, 4). Postmodernist thinkers argue that the sublime no longer refers to the idea of the higher being, but rather focuses on the failure of representation (Shaw 2017, 168). Jean-François Lyotard points out that the postmodern “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (1984, 81). In other words, it is not the idea of something beyond that is interesting to modern scholars, but rather the fact that it cannot be reasonably represented, and that mind fails to find expression adequate to the crux of the experience. Niloufar Behrooz and Hossein Pirnajmuddin describe how “for Kant, the sublime was the natural, sensible and conceptual world exceeded, for Lyotard it is cultural man-made technologies and discourses gone wild, beyond rule, exceeding what is presentable” (2016, 185).

According to Lyotard, the sublime is an event stemming from the lack of reconciliation between the concept and the form. It is the impossibility of precise representation that astonishes the viewer into a stupor, and makes them realize the limits of their reasoning (Shaw 2017, 182-183). It is precisely this tendency – resistance to the analysis by means of the rational mind – that is crucial in the postmodern theory of the sublime (189). Rather than draw attention to the grand powers that might have led to the creation of the object, it focuses precisely on the human inability to articulate the experience. In *Ambiguous Subjects: Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime*, Jennifer Wawrzinek states that “this failure of language is where the sublime begins” (2008, 11).

It may seem that the postmodern world leaves no place for such lofty ideas and that encountering the transcendental in the sublime is no longer possible. Discussing the sublime in *White Noise*, Julian Henneberg emphasizes that the encounter fails to summon the experience of the transcendental. In their analysis of *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*, Behrooz and Pirnajmuddin argue that the power of the sublime has been undermined by the absurd, and that the result therefore falls under the rubric of what they term ‘the ridiculous sublime.’ Other modes are introduced in their analysis of *Mao II* (1991). However, the authors maintain that “[t]he sublime in DeLillo is a phenomenon that cannot be plainly categorized as technological, violent, ridiculous, or nostalgic; it is all of those characteristics and more” (2015, 143). Consequently, I claim, the appearance of the Romantic sublime, with its emphasis on the transcendental experience, is within the realm of possibility as sketched by the previous commentators of the writer’s work.

Indeed, DeLillo himself has shown that it is possible to reconcile the ideas governing the Romantic and the postmodern theories of the sublime, stating that “in the background of [his] work” there has been “a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond

our touch and just beyond our vision” (quoted in DeCurtis 1991, 330). I believe that this notion is especially relevant to *Zero K*. As argued above, the postmodern sublime is extensively constructed in novels such as *White Noise*, *Mao II*, or *Cosmopolis*; however, according to Elise Martucci, “although DeLillo’s novels present and respond to the postmodern environment in which they are set, they do not necessarily adhere to the principles of postmodern thought” (2009, 7). My argument below is that in *Zero K* DeLillo creates a sublime that, on the one hand, fits modern sensibilities, but on the other, offers the solace of finding the transcendental aspect in the experience.

### 3. TOWARDS THE SUBLIME IN *ZERO K*

Published in 2016, *Zero K* is DeLillo’s seventeenth novel. It tells the story of Jeffrey Lockhart, who travels to a secret facility known as the Convergence, where he is to accompany his stepmother Artis during her last days, before she undergoes a cryonics procedure. He is invited there by his estranged father, billionaire Ross Lockhart, one of the sponsors of the facility, who seeks a way – for his wife and eventually also for himself – towards immortality by means of cutting-edge technology. Jeffrey, once rejected and abandoned by his father, is apprehensive of him, and has always tried to define himself as a complete opposite. Unsurprisingly, he looks at the Convergence project with skepticism, since it frustrates the neat way in which he has visualized his father as a soulless money-grubber. Jeffrey is thus forced to confront his own essence as ‘non-Ross,’ which has become slippery and suspect.

Jeffrey Lockhart is the perfect protagonist to explore the connection between the sublime and the transcendental in the modern world. To a large extent, he is the quintessential postmodern character: steeped in the world of signs, and desperately looking for an experience that goes beyond the mundane. At the Convergence facility he struggles with isolation, feeling trapped (DeLillo 2016, 20). Furthermore, again in postmodernist fashion, Jeffrey has a keen sense of language, and tries – usually in vain – to properly name the phenomena that he is witnessing. He uses language to ground himself in a reality which is nebulous and enigmatic. Once, returning to his room after meeting with a wheelchair-bound boy, he composes himself by naming the objects in his room: “When I walked into my room I looked at whatever there was to see and touch and then I spoke the word for each thing. There was a bottle of hand sanitizer in the pygmy bathroom that hadn’t been there before and this messed up my immersion in the plain words for the familiar objects. I looked in the mirror over the sink and said my name aloud” (DeLillo 2016, 96). Other time, he meets with a man in a garden somewhere in the facility, and provides a comment about the name he gave to him: “Ben-Ezra. I needed to think about his real name, his birth name. I needed a form of self-defense, a way to creep insidiously into his life” (DeLillo 2016, 129). Pondering the names and the language is Jeffrey’s way of reestablishing reality and grounding himself when facing uncomfortable topics, such as Artis and her attaining immortality, and the enigmatic atmosphere of the Convergence facility.

The abnormal experiences at the facility shake Jeffrey to the core and open to him an unknown world that refuses description by means of familiar language. Although he seeks different experiences, he still struggles against acknowledging this bizarre nexus of art and technology. The Convergence facility is a space that challenges his perceptions of

the world, defying description. The problem of the limits of language is aligned with the novel's focus on death and its meaning in present-day, technologically-oriented society. Namely, in *Zero K*, DeLillo strives to envision what immortality would mean, if achieved.

In an underground office at the Convergence, a bleak assembly of stone structures, Ross explains to Ross the purpose of the operation, describing cryonics as “[f]aith-based technology. That’s what it is. Another god. Not so different, it turns out, from some of the earlier ones. Except that it’s real, it’s true, it delivers” (DeLillo 2016, 9). Quoting Timothy Melley’s argument that technology should be understood more as a system of ideas and material devices, Henneberg comments that the technological sublime should be considered similarly, i.e. as an assembly of systems rather than a solitary object that produces the feeling (2011, 57). Moreover, according to Alexandra K. Glavanakova, in *Zero K* it is exactly the technology which promises transcendence (2014, 96). There is no specific device that brings forth the feeling of the sublime; it is a complex set of systems that creates a sublime transcendental experience at the facility.

The sublime in the novel is presented in multiple ways, one of which is an abundance of religious or spiritual language used as a means of grasping the essential quality of the project. During one of the conversations with his son, Ross Lockhart describes part of the Convergence as follows: “Down in the area that serves as a hospice I sometimes stand among the people being prepared to undergo the process. Anticipation and awe intermingled. Far more palpable than apprehension or uncertainty. There’s a reverence, a state of astonishment. They’re together in this Something far larger than they’d ever imagined. They feel a common mission, a destination. And I find myself trying to imagine such a place centuries back. A lodging, a shelter for travelers. For pilgrims” (DeLillo 2016, 9). Thus, for Ross, the Convergence is no mere research facility or cryonics laboratory, but is imagined as a resting place for travelers on a religious journey, with medieval antecedents. He acknowledges that they are dealing with powers that reach beyond the material, and suggests the existence of a world beyond. The Convergence is the last stop before entering that space, and as such is constructed so as to intensify the sense of the sublime. Since the science facility becomes analogous to a temple, it is filled with a solemn and contemplative atmosphere, fit for pondering the non-material.

The Convergence is specifically designed around Ross’s new technological god and promise of immortality. Jeffrey realizes this, as he meets a pair of twins whom – in his obsessive need to name as a means of maintaining some hold on the surrounding reality – he calls the Stenmarks. He believes them to be the masterminds behind the design, describing their role in the following way:

This was their aesthetic of seclusion and concealment, all the elements that I found so eerie and disembodied. The empty halls, the color patterns, the office doors that did or did not open into an office. The mazelike moments, time suspended, content blunted, the lack of explanation. I thought of the movie screens that appeared and vanished, the silent films, the mannequin with no face. I thought of my room, the uncanny plainness of it, the nowhere-ness, conceived and designed as such, and the rooms like it, maybe five hundred or a thousand, and the idea made me feel again that I was dwindling into indistinctness. And the dead, or maybe dead, or whatever they were, the cryogenic dead,

upright in their capsules. This was art in itself, nowhere else but here.  
(DeLillo 2016, 73)

As is evident particularly from the final fragment of the quotation, Jeffrey is overwhelmed by the art-like design of the facility. Consumed by the astonishing and eerie space of the Convergence, which draws attention to itself, he focuses on the here and now. This recalls Barnett Newman's understanding of the sublime, which emphasizes the perception of the present (Shaw 2017, 180). Jeffrey's reaction in *Zero K* is in accordance with the postmodern idea of the sublime; above it, however, DeLillo hangs the specter of the transcendental.

This latter notion is further developed in the scene of Jeffrey's wandering through the corridors of the Convergence, where he encounters eerie mannequins. His investigation leads him deeper into the complex, the nature of which he struggles to grasp. He offers the following description: "I stood there and tried to absorb what I was seeing. I searched for the word. There was a word I wanted, not *crypt* or *grotto*, and in the meantime all I could do was look intently and try to accumulate the details.... I walked along, bodies on both sides of me and the sight was overwhelming, and the place itself, the word itself – the word was *catacomb*" (DeLillo 2016, 133). Jeffrey is confronted with the sublime, encountering what Wawrzinek has described as "an excess that defies representation, an otherness that confounds the self" (2008, 13). He is struck speechless by an eerie, disturbing, but also fascinating sight. Rather than a natural, spectacular phenomenon, this is a subtle, disturbing man-made space that offers no explanation. However, not ending there, the sublime event proceeds into the realm of the transcendental. Jeffrey continues: "These figures, these desert saints, mummified, desiccated in their underground burial chamber, the claustrophobic power of the scene, the faint stink of rot. I was breathless for a moment. Could I avoid interpreting the figures as an ancestral version of the upright men and women in their cryonic capsules, actual humans on the verge of immortality? I didn't want interpretation. I wanted to see and feel what was here, even if I was an unequal to the experience as it folded over me" (DeLillo 2016, 133). Thus, Jeffrey relies on religious language to describe the scene unfolding before him. He imposes spiritual qualities on the mannequins, declaring that he stands apart from the witnessed experience. However, he senses a possibility of something beyond the visible, a potential collective. This solemn experience of the sublime variety opens itself to the idea of the transcendental.

In one of the final scenes, as Jeffrey is led towards the main cryonics chamber, the novel offers a full return to the Romantic idea of the sublime. This is somewhat reminiscent of Jack Gladney's response to the "airborne toxic event" in *White Noise*: "[o]ur fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, created by elemental and willful rhythms" (DeLillo, 2009, 127-128). The description, seen by Henneberg as an "exemplary expression of the technological sublime" (2011, 59), can in fact be linked to the Romantic variant of the dynamic sublime, which emphasized awe, terror, and a spiritual awakening in the face of an incredible power.

In *Zero K*, on the other hand, in the scene of Jeffrey's entering the chamber, DeLillo offers an example of what may be seen as the Kantian mathematical sublime. The vast underground graveyard is a masterpiece of human ingenuity and the peak of cryonics capabilities. Awestruck by the sight of rows upon rows of cryonic pods lining a massive

space under the facility, Jeffrey describes the hall as follows: “Here, there were no lives to think about or imagine. This was pure spectacle, a single entity, the bodies regal in their cryonic bearing. It was a form of visionary art, it was body art with broad implications.... If this is what my father wanted me to see, then it was my corresponding duty to feel a twinge of awe and gratitude. And I did. Here was science awash in irrepressible fantasy. I could not stifle my admiration” (DeLillo 2016, 133).

It could thus be argued that Jeffrey experiences the sublime in the most traditional sense. He enters a space obscure and ominous, but at the same time awe-inspiring. Shocked by this bizarre environment, he nevertheless cannot help but admire the sheer human ingenuity behind the project. Vastness and grandeur – Burkean qualities that summon the sublime (1990, 97-99) – are here associated not with a natural sight, but with a technological marvel. All this culminates in Jeffrey’s becoming a witness to his stepmother’s final resting place, which encapsulates the idea of the sublime and the transcendental: “Her body seemed lit from within. She stood erect, on her toes, shaved head tilted upward, eyes closed, breasts firm. It was an idealized human, encased, but it was also Artis. Her arms were at her sides, fingers cusped at thighs, legs parted slightly. It was a beautiful sight. It was the human body as a model creation. I believed this. It was body in this instance that would not age. And it was Artis, here, alone, who carried the themes of this entire complex into some measure of respect” (DeLillo 2016, 258). Thus, Jeffrey is enchanted by an eerie yet beautiful sight, producing reverence and respect for the crowning achievement of the Convergence. Thanks to its technology, Artis has transcended her human limits and became a “model creation” (DeLillo 2016, 258). Although Behrooz and Pirnajmuddin state that “[i]n the postmodern culture, the distinction between the all and the nothing is blurred to the point of identification” and thus “a grand concept/entity like the sublime loses its essential quality of awe and grandeur” (2016, 195), the climactic scene in *Zero K* proves that the sublime may still retain its transcendental qualities. Jeffrey’s experience at the cryonic graveyard is not a hollow or ridiculous experience – quite the contrary. Nathan Ashman maintains that “when viewed together, these pods augment and transmute into a different arrangement entirely, a spectacular installation of ‘body art’ that reconfigures death into something transcendent and sacred” (2019, 13). It is a reverent and solemn event, where Jeffrey – who for the most part of the narrative has played the function of the doubter – is truly awe-struck by the art of the Convergence. Moreover, by seeing Artis in her state of cryonic transcendence, he learns to consider the purpose of the facility with a degree of respect. Jeffrey’s sense of something beyond the known realm of the reasonable and the material is strengthened further by the novel’s last scene, when Jeffrey is travelling by bus through New York City’s downtown area. Together with a boy, a perfect stranger, they observe the spectacular and rare event known as “Manhattanhenge” (Stirone 2022), when the sunset aligns perfectly with the street grid: “It was striking thing to see, in our urban huddle, the power of it, the great round ruddy mass, and I knew that there was a natural phenomenon, here in Manhattan, once or twice a year, in which the sun’s rays align with the local street grid. The full solar disk, bleeding into the streets, lighting up the towers to either side of us, and 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.... I didn’t need heaven’s light. I had the boy’s cries of wonder” (DeLillo 2016, 273-274). The fact that the name eludes the language-obsessed Jeffrey is telling, suggestive of his new-found openness that stretches beyond the linguistic. The event



bridges the ancient and the modern, occurring in the midst of an ultramodern space, associated with capital and information. Jeffrey's stay at the Convergence has led him to increased susceptibility to wonder, and a heightened ability to experience the sublime vicariously.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

As described by a long line of scholars over several centuries, the sublime may take many forms. The general consensus seems to gravitate towards a feeling of awe and terror, invoked by an encounter with phenomena that overwhelm the mind. Whether due to the massiveness of the event or its sheer destructive capabilities, the viewer is shocked and unable to comprehend their feelings. In this state, the mind becomes conscious of its limits, which may lead to the supposition of a realm beyond them. However, postmodern theory has largely departed from the idea of the transcendental in the sublime, focusing instead on the failure of representation itself.

Don DeLillo's novels often problematize this very failure, yet in *Zero K* he has reconciled the idea of modern, technological sublime with the transcendental. The story revolves around a cutting-edge cryonic facility, designed to emphasize the spiritual and religious side of an experiment with immortality. Despite his various doubts, Jeffrey's visit to the Convergence proves solemn and ultimately awe-inspiring, and culminates in his witnessing of the massive cryonic graveyard. In his shock, he is overwhelmed by the ingenuity of the cryonics, the massiveness of the project, and the all-encompassing spiritual atmosphere. His new-found openness to wonder, even if vicarious, is emphasized by the eerie, ancient-modern spectacle of Manhattanhenge. In *Zero K*, the experience of the sublime is not hollow, as scholars such as Behrooz and Pirnajmuddin have argued about some of DeLillo's earlier novels. Rather, it draws attention to the idea of the transcendental and overcoming death, thus demonstrating that even within postmodern reality there is space for a spiritually fulfilling experience, ironically made possible through technological progress.

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