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BARING THE ESSENCE IN DELILLO'S *THE BODY ARTIST*: REACHING THE TRUTH THROUGH FACING DEATH

Abstract: *The Body Artist* (2001) is arguably DeLillo's most unusual novel. The starting point of this research is that this novel deals with the concepts which shape the life of contemporary man: time, death, and identity. Faced with a severe trauma caused by the death of her husband, the protagonist Lauren Hartke rejects the conventional way of mourning. She responds to the great tragedy that occurred to her with self-isolation and silence. In a secluded house Lauren attempts to stop time and reconsiders her beliefs and assumptions. Testing basic attitudes is enabled by an extraordinary character, Mr. Tuttle. He inspires Lauren to view time, identity, body, and language in a completely new light, which leads her to spiritual transcendence. Truth and spiritual transcendence are possible in DeLillo's oeuvre and they are usually linked to art and moments of connectedness.

Keywords: DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, time, death, identity, language, body, art, resistance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the critics such as Philip Nel and Mirna Radin Sabadoš claim that Don DeLillo does not deal with social and cultural issues in *The Body Artist* (2001) (Nel 2002: 736; Radin Sabadoš 2017: 156), the starting point of this research is that this novel deals with the effects of living in the era of corporate capitalism. As Mišić (2019: 84) notices, one of the motifs of the novel is the possession of the individual by the system. A typical representative of such an individual, who devotes his life to the world of media and profit, is Rey Robbles, the husband of the protagonist Lauren Hartke. Who is Rey Robbles? We do not know. As Mark Osteen (2005: 69) suggests, Rey is "a man of masks". The reason is that he "hated who he was" (DeLillo 2001: 61). Even the name "Rey Robbles" is not his given name. His real name is Alejandro Alquezar. Although the reader is acquainted with some facts from his biography, it does not help to create a more complete impression of this enigmatic character. Anne Longmuir (2007: 528) suggests that Rey's despair

is due to his realization that his life has been wasted, that his art has been absorbed into the dominant culture. She explains that the art that is subject to representation – the art of writers, filmmakers, and photographers – is easily absorbed into the mainstream culture. Merging with mainstream culture, art loses its distinctive features, which leads to its eventual erasure, which consequently results in the artist's self-erasure and retreat into silence. Lauren realizes this and succeeds to avoid the trap. Therefore, she is determined not to advertise or broadcast her performance. She understands that reproduction leads to a loss of authenticity. This is the basic difference between the two artists in the novel – Lauren's art stands for resistance and authenticity, whereas Rey's art is the art that “belongs entirely to the culture of reproduction of late capitalism” (Longmuir 2007: 532).

Most critics agree that *The Body Artist* is probably DeLillo's most unusual novel. Its elusive and terse style can be compared to the style of *The Names* (1982). As Vukotić (2014: 70) asserts, there is a tendency towards a more concise expression in DeLillo's oeuvre. The characters' ability of articulation is waning, and the realization of truth is reached through the unspoken. Hetman compares *The Body Artist* to *Underworld* (1997) and finds the gap between these two novels unprecedented in DeLillo's literary creation. Whereas *Underworld* has the form of an epic, introduces many characters and represents an attempt to “collect, distill and analyze the experience of the American society” (Hetman 2017: 88), *The Body Artist* is short, “without the historical avant-garde leanings” (Nel 2002: 738), introduces only three characters and deals with personal experience (Hetman 2017: 88). As Vukotić notices, DeLillo is aware that we do not learn the truth through historical facts. The plot of *The Body Artist* does not rely upon the fragments of history, artifacts, as was the case in DeLillo's earlier novels. In DeLillo's fiction, the realization of truth can be attained only in moments of connectedness: “The truth is present in every individual; we only have to remember it when we slow down time so as to finally see what we are looking at” (Vukotić 2014: 81). Longmuir (2007: 528) interprets *The Body Artist* as “more difficult and less accessible than *Underworld*”. She claims that DeLillo deliberately created *The Body Artist* to be diametrically opposed to its predecessor. DeLillo planned so in order to avoid the destiny of other “artists whose work belongs to the symbolic order” (Longmuir 2007: 531). In a way, DeLillo is similar to Lauren – they both choose authenticity and originality over clichés and the expected.

In *The Body Artist*, the main “story” takes place in the protagonist's mind. Mišić (2019: 83) correctly notes that there is a shift from the outside to the inside.¹ In an effort to tell the story from an internal perspective, DeLillo attempts to get rid of the referents. We do not know where and when the story takes place. As

¹ Philip Nel claims that this shift, along with DeLillo's effort to create a form of language stripped of metaphors, recalls the poetics of modernism. The interpretation of *The Body Artist* as a revival of modernism is the aim of his article “DeLillo's Return to Form: The Modernist Poetics of 'The Body Artist'”.

Kontoulis and Kitis (2011: 233) observe, “the novel happens somewhere that could be anywhere, sometime that could be anytime”. Indeed, the focus of this novel is certainly not on its “rudimentary plot” (Hetman 2017: 88). DeLillo’s endeavor is obviously not to tell the story; instead, the novel may be interpreted as a sort of meditation on “being, time, and death” (Bonca 2002: 60).

2. FACING DEATH

The novel opens with a delineation of a typical day in the life of a newlywed couple, Rey and Lauren. The reader discerns a sense of boredom and alienation. Although Rey mentions that the sense of another day he has to live terrifies him, Lauren does not react, as if she does not take him seriously. Whereas Mišić (2019: 86) contends that since both of them employ monologues, their communication is ineffective and there are “cracks in the apparent marital idyll”, Hetman (2017: 91) advocates the position that the two of them “do communicate, as if in spite of the words uttered”. Lauren and Rey, similarly to Lauren and Mr. Tuttle afterwards, reach an understanding that is beyond words. Their understanding is mysterious and cannot be explained with words. However, the situation changes dramatically the very next day. Lauren is taken aback with the news that her husband committed suicide with a handgun in the apartment of his ex-wife.

The protagonist’s experience may be interpreted as a kind of awakening. DeLillo chooses to open the novel with a description of a “strongbright day after a storm” (DeLillo 2001: 9). Although the author attempts to get rid of metaphors throughout the course of the novel, this metaphor is a very important one. The storm is a metaphor for the storm in Lauren’s life, induced by Rey’s death. Though Rey during their last conversation ironically remarks that she is a happy “young woman who eats and sleeps and lives forever” (DeLillo 2001: 17), Lauren does not recognize his despair. Moreover, Rey’s ex-wife mentions that everybody knew that Rey was planning to commit suicide. Everybody except his wife. The shock after Rey’s death is even bigger after the realization that she did not “know him as well as she used to believe” (Stamenković 2018: 214). Lauren then decides to turn her back to the world and think about the past. She is resolved to dive into herself in order to find answers to the questions that are bothering her. As the ending of the novel implies, she has found the answers she was looking for. After the “storm of her life” is over, she finally opens the window and lets the air from the outside fill the room. Only after facing the “thing” that terrifies most people – death – is she ready to continue her life and go out into the world again.

After her husband’s sudden death, Lauren undergoes a traumatic period. However, her bereavement is rather unconventional. J. Heath Atchley (2004: 338) points to the fact that Lauren does not behave as persons who experience the death of someone close to them usually do. She does not weep; she does not change her

behavior in any dramatic manner (Ibid.). In spite of advice to surround herself with people and not to return to the rental where she lived with Rey, Lauren is determined to live there alone. In fact, she considers it of utmost importance to isolate from the rest of the world. There, in a secluded house, she stops time and creates her own world, of course, with the help of Mr. Tuttle, who inspires her to “test, rather than assume, our received notions of being, time and death” (Bonca 2002: 60).

The Body Artist is probably DeLillo's most explicit attempt to suggest the need for redefining and reconceptualizing time. Radin Sabadoš (2017: 159) notices that most people do not realize that our way of measuring time is arbitrary. Moreover, this critic underlines the importance of the concept of time since the “relationship toward time reflects the attitude of a society toward death” (Ibid.). The way we experience time depends on our personal circumstances. There is a difference between time viewed subjectively and objectively. For example, to a person who experiences a traumatic loss, time stands still, but the rest of the world goes on with their lives as if nothing happened.

Lauren does not conform to social and cultural assumptions about the proper way to mourn. Her bereavement is characterized by isolation and silence. Longmuir finds it symptomatic that Loren slides into silence after Rey's retreat into silence. She interprets their silences as ways of resisting the system (Longmuir 2007: 533). However, whereas Rey's act of suicide is the act of a disillusioned man who sees no other way out, Lauren succeeds to overcome the trauma caused by Rey's death. Lauren attempts to stop time in order to process the pain. Her way of dealing with grief is extraordinary since she uses her pain to create something valuable – art. As Adam explains, one of the most common ways of stopping time is through rituals: “By performing a ritual, an event or a deed is repeated in the present – therefore, its meaning is repeated and preserved in its original form” (qtd. in Radin Sabadoš 2017: 160). In *The Body Artist* there are no typical rituals such as a funeral – instead, the ritual takes the form of an artistic performance. Mišić points to the difference between cultural and artistic performance. In her opinion, Lauren chooses artistic performance because it is directed towards herself, whereas cultural performance is directed towards others (Mišić 2019: 90).²

Rey's death is probably the most important moment in Lauren's life. A huge shock induced by a severe trauma forces Lauren to reconsider her life, her past, her beliefs and attitudes. After the death of her husband the protagonist of *The Body Artist* experiences an epiphany, similarly to modernist heroes (most notably Joyce's characters). As Bonca (1996: 36–37) asserts, Lauren succeeds in “penetrat[ing] through the white noise of postmodern culture”. He correctly concludes that DeLil-

² In Lauren's view, it is a crucial thing not to behave in accordance with imposed roles and prescribed ways (Mišić 2019: 91). Lauren's choice recalls the choice of Nick Shay, the narrator and protagonist of *Underworld*. Similarly to Lauren Hartke, Nick realizes that real, authentic moments take place when we refuse to conform to imposed social roles and find our own way.

lo through Lauren's character attempts to show how the condition of being "knowingly on the path toward death can provide the condition by which we uncover the crucial secrets of our life" (Bonca 2002: 60). People advise Lauren to surround herself with people in order not to think about death. However, she finds it crucial to face death in order to understand and overcome it. She tries hard to get rid of the 'white noise', of all the things that distract her from seeing the essence. She considers it very important to reject all roles and assumptions which come from the outside world, seeing them as obstacles on her way to the truth. Lauren is one of DeLillo's characters who are able to "transcend reality and pass into a state of pure, universal consciousness" (Vukotić 2014: 70). As John Duvall (2008: 4) notices, the possibility of spiritual transcendence is usually linked to art in DeLillo's oeuvre. In DeLillo's own words, "we seek patterns in art which eludes us in natural experience" (Decurtis 2005: 74).

3. IDENTITY, BODY, LANGUAGE

In addition to the concept of time, the concept of identity also needs redefining. We start from two basic assumptions concerning identity. The first premise is that identity for DeLillo implies the freedom of individuals to disobey imposed social roles and attempt to organize their own lives as they see fit (Mišić 2019: 91). Life in accordance with prescribed social roles means that we act in an imposed and unnatural way. To put it differently, living as we have been taught to takes us away from the core of our being, from who we really are. As Lauren notices, we can learn "who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are" (DeLillo 2001: 110). The second hypothesis is that identity is neither stable nor it is separate. Identity is always in the process of creation. What is more, an individual is not seen as a being who can exist on his own. More likely, DeLillo's characters are represented as parts of a larger system. The characters in DeLillo's fiction "seem to merge into one another" (Baker 2000: 101). DeLillo implies that "human beings are united in a universal consciousness" (Kontoulis, Kitis 2011: 236). Mr. Tuttle is the medium, the miracle which enables Lauren to be "Lauren. But less and less" (DeLillo 2001: 117). His speech, as we have already mentioned, mostly consists of the reproductions of Lauren and Rey's past conversations. Like a true medium, Mr. Tuttle is able to perfectly imitate Rey and Lauren's voices and mannerisms. As Kontoulis and Kitis (2011: 232) propound, by repeating their speeches, Mr. Tuttle "dissolves the binarism that individuates Rey and Lauren". This way of merging into others represents the way in which Lauren can face the death of her husband. During her performance she experiences the symbolic death (Mišić 2019: 83) of her identity. After the performance, Lauren is able to overcome Rey's death, to let him go. However, first she has to mourn him properly, in her own way. Lauren is not willing to succumb to conventional ways of mourning. She chooses not to "embalm and

forget Rey, but to let him live through echoes” (Osteen 2005: 65). Therefore, she takes an aspect of her late husband during her artistic performance, copying his speech and mannerisms.

Lauren's sinking into herself is followed by “radical stratification of her being” (Bonca 2002: 65). She deliberately stops taking care of herself, especially of her body (Stamenković 2018: 206), which she first neglects and later exhausts doing extremely hard exercises in cold weather. Lauren attempts to forget who she is, what her needs are, so as to “be less herself and thus more impervious to pain” (Kontoulis, Kitis 2011: 226). Her isolation and arresting of time is her way of getting to the core, to the truth. In order to overcome the fear of death she imagines what it feels like to be dead: “Why not sink into it? Let death bring you down. Give death its sway” (DeLillo 2001: 116). In a way, such a conception makes her closer to Rey: “she wanted to disappear in Rey's smoke, be dead, be him” (DeLillo 2001: 34). By creating a time vacuum, she attempts to get to the gist, because, in her opinion, “When time stops [...] We don't stop, we become stripped down, less self-assured” (DeLillo 2001: 107).

What Lauren attempts, according to Osteen (2005: 74), is to “recapture the past through Tuttle”. This is essential in order to face the past, to process the pain. Mr. Tuttle, who can be interpreted either as a real character or as a product of Lauren's imagination, functions as a medium. His specificity lies in his autistic behavior. He can speak, but he is unable to communicate in an efficient way. He mostly repeats what the other person says (echolalia). It is precisely his lack of character and ability to perfectly reproduce fragments of Rey and Lauren's conversations that turns him into a medium which enables Lauren to recapture Rey and their shared moments from the past. Lauren has to relive these moments so as to overcome the trauma and move on. Mr. Tuttle, who uses only Present Simple, does not make a difference between past, present, and future. He lives in a sort of a “perennial present” (Kontoulis, Kitis 2011: 223) and helps Lauren understand that these distinctions are arbitrary.

At the beginning of her acquaintance with Mr. Tuttle, Lauren is puzzled by Mr. Tuttle's behavior. She finds it strange that he does not recognize arbitrary distinctions, that he does not make a difference between past, present, and future. However, over time she realizes that people do not need a socially developed language to communicate. She finally understands Mr. Tuttle through the unspoken, similarly to understanding between her and Rey. Therefore, Mr. Tuttle helps Lauren realize that in order to understand who we are we have to withdraw from the social self (Bonca 2002: 66). This withdrawal implies not only the rejection of imposed social roles – it also implies the use of pure language, language devoid of social functions and codes. As Hetman explains, DeLillo in *The Body Artist* questions “language's capacity to depict experience” (Hetman 2017: 89). There is a gap between the language we use and our consciousness (Nel 2002: 738), and this gap is deepening with the use of metaphors. Metaphors are “inevitable, but

futile” (Nel 2002: 739). It comes as no surprise that the moment when Lauren feels she truly understands Mr. Tuttle occurs when she starts to chant incomprehensibly. This chanting (babbling) is for DeLillo “a more pure form of communication” (LeClair 1983: 84), a distilled version of language that emanates directly from our being.³ Therefore, Longmuir claims that “he [Mr. Tuttle] does not speak language, it speaks him” (Longmuir 2007: 534). In those moments of ecstasy (epiphany) Lauren feels she transcends the gap between her consciousness and the outside world. She feels she has finally known “the wedge into meaning, the old deep meaning of the word” (DeLillo 2001: 75).

Some critics depict *The Body Artist* as a novel of silence. Indeed, this novel is DeLillo's shortest one, his language is devoid of referents, and the style is hollow and terse. Moreover, the protagonist reacts to the greatest traumas of her life (her mother's and her husband's deaths) with silence. However, Atchley clarifies that this silence does not symbolize a loss of words: “a novel, no matter how terse, is a collection of words” (Atchley 2004: 338). This critic suggests that *The Body Artist* represents “a loss of language through language”, which is described as DeLillo's refusal to use words as a medium to transmit a message (Atchley 2004: 342). For DeLillo, the way we use a language is very important. He values it so much that he perceives language as a shaping factor (Hetman 2017: 89). The manner we use a language, in DeLillo's opinion, shapes our identity to a great extent. Therefore, our language represents not only a link with the outside world; it also creates our internal world.

As Radin Sabadoš (2017: 157) propounds, the body is probably the only remaining immanent human feature in the contemporary world. Stamenković notices that the body, although interpreted as an inferior part of the Body–Being binary opposition in the Christian and humanist tradition, is the “crucial element of one's identity” which denotes “the space we inhabit” (Stamenković 2018: 207). Similarly, Kontoulis and Kitis conclude that the body is the most essential human feature, but they also add that the body reaches its full meaning when it is “stripped of all cultural, social, and mental overlays” (Kontoulis, Kitis 2011: 239). This is exactly what Lauren is attempting to get to, both in her life and in her performance. There is a parallel between Lauren's stripping down during her performance and her rejection of everything she considers arbitrary and superfluous. We can draw many parallels between identity and the body. As it has already been mentioned, authentic experience in DeLillo's fiction takes place when an individual refuses to act in the expected way. People are reduced to mere cogs in a giant system in the era of corporate capitalism. Therefore, by refusing to live according to imposed roles one resists the system. In Longmuir's opinion, the body can also be a site

³ Paul Maltby notices that DeLillo's endeavor is to get to the primal, prelapsarian language that bridges the gap between the self and the world (qtd. in Nel 2002: 745). As in the case of Samuel Beckett, DeLillo's language becomes more concise over time.

of resistance (Longmuir 2007: 537). As Stamenković (2018: 203) explains, the basic functions of the body are “performing everyday tasks, as well as social roles”. However, such a definition indicates that the system controls the body. In order to resist the system, Lauren neglects her body. As in the case of language, she is inspired by Mr. Tuttle, whom she finds naked on the third floor. Mr. Tuttle, who is not ashamed either of his naked body or of the moment when he defecates and urinates in Lauren’s car, symbolizes a man free from society and its control via a prescribed way of behavior. Moreover, as an integral part of identity, the body is never fixated, but always enacted (Longmuir 2007: 537). In order to show that the body is not stable, Lauren during her performance takes the aspect of numerous people, and “the climax of her show” (Longmuir 2007: 537) occurs when she takes the aspect of a naked man, Mr. Tuttle. Her artistic performance may be compared to Rey’s suicide in terms of taking control. Namely, one of the implications of *Body Time* is that the body is controlled by society. In order to resist the system, we have to take control of the body. Similarly, although Rey’s suicide may be interpreted as an act of cowardice, it can also be analyzed as a way of taking control. Rey, who let the system assimilate and eventually erase him, was determined to regain control over the course of his life by not letting it end naturally.

4. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the novel Lauren Hartke is “the happy young woman who eats and sleeps and lives forever” (DeLillo 2001: 17). It seems that she takes her marital life, as well as her husband, for granted. However, all her beliefs and attitudes are being reconsidered from the moment she learns that her husband committed suicide. It turns out that other people knew him better and expected something like that. Lauren’s despair is certainly great, but she does not show any sign of it. She retreats into silence, attempting to find her own way of dealing with Rey’s death. Mr. Tuttle is not only a medium that enables her to recapture the past in order to relieve it so as to understand it; Mr. Tuttle may also be interpreted as a source of inspiration that motivates her to view the concepts of time, death, language, and body in a new light. Moreover, Mr. Tuttle is the sort of Muse who inspires her art. In order to get to the core of the problem, Lauren undergoes stripping down, both metaphorically and literally. Her first reaction to Rey’s death is self-isolation. If she is to understand who she is, she has to reject the imposed social roles and prescribed ways of behavior. Then Lauren attempts to forget who she is so as to be closer to Rey, to experience death. She neglects her needs; she does not take care of her body. Moreover, an integral part of getting to the core of her being is the metamorphosis of her language. Lauren comes to the understanding that metaphors do not improve communication – in fact, metaphors inhibit true understanding. Efficient communication for DeLillo arises when we use a pure form of

language, the language that arises directly from our being. Lauren's performance suggests that identity, as well as the body (the essential element of being), is not fixated, stable. Identity and the body are always in the process of creation.

The Body Artist may be interpreted as an example of DeLillo's endeavor not to fall into cliché, but to strive towards authenticity and development. A similar striving is present in Lauren, who refuses to be assimilated into the dominant culture and eventually erased. Her lifestyle, along with her art, which is not susceptible to reproduction, may be viewed as a way of resisting cloning in the era of corporate capitalism. The implication of the novel is that the system employs various manners of controlling our lives. One way of control is control of the body. *The Body Time* suggests that each individual should take over control of his/her body, which would represent another way of resistance. Finally, Rey's suicide may also be interpreted as a desperate attempt of an artist who got assimilated into the dominant culture to regain control over his life, even if this actually means preventing his life from ending in a natural way.

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ОГОЉАВАЊЕ СУШТИНЕ У ДЕЛИЛОВОМ БОДИ АРТИСТУ: ДОСЕЗАЊЕ ИСТИНЕ КРОЗ СУОЧАВАЊЕ СА СМРЋУ

Резиме: *Боди артист* (2001) је вероватно ДеЛилово најнеобичнији роман. Његов неухватљив и језгровит стил одражава тенденцију ка сажетијем изразу у ДеЛиловом књижевном опусу. Полазно становиште овог истраживања јесте да се овај роман бави концептима који обликују живот савременог човека: временом, смрћу и идентитетом. Суочена са тешком траумом изазваном смрћу супруга, протагонисткиња Лорен Хартке одбацује конвенционални начин туговања. На велику трагедију која јој се догодила она одговара ћутањем и самоизолацијом. Она понире у себе како би се суочила са Рејовом смрћу, како би процесуирала бол. У издвојеној кући Лорен покушава да заустави време и преиспита своје претпоставке и уверења. Ово преиспитивање омогућује један врло необични лик којег Лорен зове г. Татл. Он инспирише Лорен да језик и идентитет сагледа у потпуно другачијем светлу, што је води ка духовној трансценденцији. У ДеЛиловој прози истина и духовна трансценденција су могући и често су повезани са уметношћу и тренуцима заједништва.

Кључне речи: ДеЛило, *Боди артист*, време, смрт, идентитет, језик, тело, уметност, отпор.