

**A Ghost Novel Looking Back:
An Anamorphic Reading of *The Body Artist***

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“But why are you here?” Lauren Hartke, the protagonist of *The Body Artist*, asks the mysterious man who suddenly materializes in her lonely house. Published in the first year of the new millennium, Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* depicts a short period in the life of a body artist, Lauren Hartke—from the morning her husband committed suicide until a few days after Lauren’s performance in Boston. In contrast with the global scale in the novelist’s previous novels, *The Body Artist* mainly stays in an isolated seashore house Lauren and her husband, Rey Robles, had rented. After Rey’s death, the above mentioned mysterious man suddenly appears in the house without any discernable relevance in terms of the novel’s main plot. Moreover, he does not act or speak in normal ways, making it hard to understand him as a character. Critics and reviewers have found symptoms of echolalia and autism in this figure with “a thinness of physical address” (48); others have called him ghost (Begley), medium (Jones), heteroclit muse (Coward), pure embodiment poetic inspiration (Osteen), and foreign body of traumatic memory (Di Prete). All of them, however, admit that this spectral figure cannot be explained in a neat way. Accordingly, most of the readings of *The Body Artist* treat the figure as a mere embodiment of Lauren’s trauma or a projection of her recovery process. This kind of reading, however, fails to do justice to the centrality of the figure or the perplexity it is designed to cause both to Lauren and the reader. I suggest, thus, a reading that centers on the very opaqueness of the spectral figure. The enigmatic man, literally placed in the middle pages of the novel, resists the organizing reading of the reader. Read in this oblique way, this mysterious figure stands in the heart of the reader’s experience of the novel and rearranges the novel’s relationship with the

reader like the famous anamorphic figure in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*.

Jacques Lacan's account of the "Gaze" that lurks behind *The Ambassador* has a narrative quality to it so that "looking" in his interpretation of the picture can be easily translated into a "reading" process. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan discusses Holbein's picture to demonstrate his concept of "Gaze." Gaze in this later work of Lacan refers to the gaze of the object of desire; when the subject realizes that the object is looking back of its own will, the uncanny realization undermines the subject's position as a subject. The stain-like "object depicted in a flying position in the foreground of" *The Ambassadors* at first seems to be an unimportant and meaningless detail, but when viewed from a point above the top-right corner obliquely, it turns out to be a very realistically portrayed human skull. Looking at the flat surface of the picture, the viewer might feel that he is in control of his eyes' look; however, this feeling of mastery is undone when he realizes the skull, unnoticed by him, has been staring back at him. Lacan describes the experience as the following:

What, then, before this display of the domain of appearance in all its most fascinating forms, is this object, which from some angles appears to be flying through the air, at others to be tilted? You cannot know—for you turn away, thus escaping the fascination of the picture. Begin by walking out of the room in which no doubt it has long held your attention. It is then that, turning round as you leave—as the author of the *Anamorphoses* describes it—you apprehend in this form...What? A skull. (Lacan 88)

In this account, there are temporally dramatic elements between the recognition of the stain and the discovery of the skull. The viewer recognizes the symbols of power, art, and science displayed in Holbein's picture first, and then realizes the skull's gaze which was there already. Lacan's interpretation of the picture, in this sense, is a retroactive reading itself, and proves that focusing on a resistant part of the artwork can be productive in a number of ways. Like Slavoj

Zizek suggests in his book *Looking Awry*, this kind of anamorphic reading can make visible a textual shading that is not available to the direct gaze. This insight is especially valuable to the reader of *The Body Artist* because the novel not only endorses but demands the similar kind of reading that “looks back.” The novel performs returns on various levels, making the reader turn back often in narrative sequence. (Point out that “looking back” in Lacan’s account has both temporal and directional implication)

The skull, for Lacan, stands for “the Real,” the material reality that exceeds any symbolic order people construct and project onto the world to produce meaning out of it. Once discovered, the skull compels the viewer/reader to reassess the entire painting, making him realize that the floating object actually “reflect our own nothingness, in the figure of the death’s head” (Lacan 92). The object’s gaze reveals the gaping lack behind our narcissistic belief in the order and the meaning of our life. Assuming that *The Body Artist* stages the mysterious man with same purpose as the skull in *The Ambassador*, the meaning of the figure lies in the very fact that the figure resists any easily accessible meaning that is produced by linear reading practice. Also, Lacan’s rhetoric in his presentation of *The Ambassadors* endows the picture with a performing quality, signaling a reversal of the traditional viewer-picture dynamics. In his account, the picture actively works on the reader, rather than passively laying itself for the reader to appreciate it. This is emblematic of a new reading experience that *The Body Artist* imagines: reading as an uncanny encounter between the reader and the text. By performing the Gaze through its characters and sentences, the novel finally transforms itself into a ghost that haunts the reader of its own will.

The very first verb of *The Body Artist* is indicative of the many obstructions the reader

will experience while reading the novel. *The Body Artist* starts with the sentence, “time seems to pass” (9). The verb “seems” implies that time in this novel actually might not be passing. The following sentences in the first paragraph picture a world keenly aware of passing time, as “the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness” (9). However, the sinister “seems” insists on the possibility that all this might not be what it “seems” to be. What the verb “seem” negates, however, is not clear at this point. The verb “seems” returns, highlighted, in the next chapter: “Everything is slow and hazy and drained and it all happens around the word *seem*” (33, emphasis original). This first paragraph of the second chapter describes how “you” feel momentarily remote and dream-like during driving. “Then the mood passes,” and “you,” the subject of the sentence, feel pain in the chest once again (33). The word “seem” in this context then marks the discord between what one fleetingly feels and the pain that is unforgettable and persistent; and this usage of the verb reminds the reader of the first “seem,” the first verb of the novel that they encountered. Therefore, in the novel’s first sentence, what is cancelled out at the same time it is narrated is a confidence in the linear perception of time—the world “coming into being” irreversibly (9). The short sentence performs a return by making the reader return to its double action.

In this way, the novel generates echoes, not only of other literary masterpieces as Mark Osteen argues, but also of its own language. The reader is often reminded of key images or words, and made to come back to an earlier point of the narrative to check what those exact words signified in the previous context. However, like the verb “seem,” the echoes do not provide a “true” meaning, nor are they designed to point to an ever-elusive yet nevertheless ideal interpretation. Instead, the echoes are focused on the acts of return themselves and the disturbances they bring; the word “seem,” for instance, negates the superficial feeling of

Lauren's detachment, but does not identify an underlying "truth." In the above quoted second chapter, pain is discovered in the open gap, but pain, by itself, is not the meaning, but the effect of the discovery. Thus always returning, the novel performs a haunting "specter" in the Derridian sense (Derrida 144).

The second paragraph of *The Body Artist* also has an enigmatic start that implies a certain returning: "It happened this final morning that they were here at the same time..." (9). The reader would realize that "this" and "final" are an odd combination when, at the end of the chapter, she learns that Rey, Lauren's husband and one of the people referred to by the pronoun "they" in this sentence, committed suicide later that day. Lauren did not know her husband's intention beforehand, so the adjective "final" indicates that this sentence is narrated after Lauren's learning of Rey's death; "this" and "here," however, contradicts "final," and implies that the sentence is stated "in" the moment. This cancellation of linearity after the first paragraph that "seemingly" emphasizes the passing of time creates the main effect of *The Body Artist*—a deferral of meaning through which the anamorphic gaze can be glimpsed.

Thus begun, the first chapter of *The Body Artist* describes an apparently routine breakfast of the couple, Lauren and Rey. Critics have found modernist-inflected poetics in the first chapter of *The Body Artist* as if the novel is returning to a previous moment in literary history. However, while it is true that *The Body Artist* is concerned with staging language's inability to represent death, the loss and lack that lies in the heart of any being, instead of expressing despair at the incapacity like a modernist novel would, this contemporary novel performs the deferral, empowering it as a spectral blot that looks back at the reader. At first, DeLillo uses sensory language to make the impression of the morning as vivid as possible. For example, as Lauren watches a blue jay outside the window, she feels that "she'd never seen a thing so clearly...the

clean shock of its appearance among the smaller brownish birds, its mineral blue and muted blue and broad dark neckband” (24). The vividness of the bird makes Lauren become “alert to the clarity of the moment,” but at the same time, she “knew it was ending already. She felt it in the blue jay” (24). Here, Lauren seems to be having a mock-modernist epiphanic moment. It is not surprising, therefore, that Philip Nel, tracing modernist aesthetics in *The Body Artist*, finds most of his examples in this first chapter. Mark Osteen, likewise, discerns echoes of *Ulysses* from this breakfast scene. However, Lauren adds, right after the above-quoted sentences, “Or maybe not” (24). This is not a statement that is interested in “bridging the gap between word and world” (Nel 736). On the contrary, “or maybe not” holds the gap open. The phrase is an example of a counteractive layer of the novel that functions against the “modernist” grain.

Thus alluring the reader with vivid language only to betray her, DeLillo makes his reader experience a deferral of meaning. It is not that the longing for “narrowing the gap between words and things” is completely denied (Nel 738). What I want to point out here is that the text makes double movements; it does state the impossible transparency of a moment, but then it cancels it out. This necessitates multiple returns, which are alien in modernist poetics. The reader, like Lauren, has to “see” the meaning of this morning “belatedly (93),” always conscious of the closely following “or may be not.” The novel constantly forces the reader to look back to contemplate the anamorphic spots like the verb “seem” and the short pale hair Lauren picked out of her mouth in “this final morning.”

In this first chapter, however, the text does not disclose the meaning of these counteractive movements. While Lauren is so alert to the bird outside the window, she is not so attentive to other, closer things around her. Absorbed in her own thoughts, she is somewhat detached from both what she is doing and what is happening around her. Interestingly, instead of

describing the details of her thoughts, the text focuses on tracking her late responses to the present events like Rey's comments on their house. These sentences, intermittently repeated, weave in and out of Lauren's mind, making the reader accompany her experience from the inside:

She went to the fridge and opened the door. She stood there remembering something. She said, "What?" Meaning what did you say, not what did you want to tell me. She remembered the soya granules...She reached in for the milk, realizing what it was he'd said that she hadn't heard about eight seconds ago. (11)

In the above passage, the mention of "eight seconds" also dictates the reader's reading time, thereby overlapping the reader's experience with that of Lauren's. As an effect, while the narrator repeatedly emphasizes the "clarity of the moment," the reader shares the distance and the belatedness of Lauren's perception of things that nullify "the clarity of the moment" (24). In this way, instead of pointing to an impossible yet ideal moment and form of transcendence, the language of *The Body Artist* focuses on immersing the reader in Lauren's "reverie (25)." This hinders the reader from recognizing what is outside of Lauren and limits the reader to the boundaries of Lauren's consciousness.

Therefore, when Rey's obituary, directly quoted from a newspaper, unexpectedly appears between the first and the second chapters, it is perceived as a violent intrusion into the text. The obituary announces that Rey Robles, a once famous movie director, committed suicide with a gun in his first wife's apartment. The obituary then goes on to summarize Rey's life, but the objective tone changes as the following pieces of information mystifies rather than explains Rey's life. It turns out that what is known about Rey's earlier life is all fabricated by himself, and the only verifiable facts about his life are his movies and his death. The various details of Rey's life the obituary manages to report only intensify a feeling of absence rather than understanding.

All of this, however, is completely new to the reader. The morning described in the previous chapter seemed so normal and peaceful. Wrapped in Lauren's consciousness, the text did not reveal anything amiss in Rey's presence or behavior to the reader, and figuring out the meaning of a blue jay outside the window seemed to be the novel's most important project. Rey appears to be a constant, well-known, and therefore comfortable element in Lauren's life. Suddenly, an alien voice intrudes the novel and announces that nothing is known about him, and that he is lost forever: "There were too many signs to understand and finally just one" (37). It turns out that Rey in "this final morning" was a ghost that the text has conjured up. It took only several seconds for Lauren to recognize and respond to her husband; death turns out to be lurking behind those deferrals that seemed so innocent.

After the traumatic incident, Lauren's language falls through the gap that has opened in her self and her perception of the world. She thinks "things she saw seemed doubtful—not doubtful but ever changing, plunged into metamorphosis, something that is also something else, but what, and what" (38). This is not a modernist despair; rather than an epistemological problem, it discloses an ontological trauma of the postmodern novel Brian McHale points out in *Postmodernist Fiction*. Lauren is unable to grasp the world around her because she does not understand what belongs to her self and what does not, and her wandering language reflects her confusion. Here, DeLillo seems to endorse the relational envisioning of the self. As Judith Butler argues in "Violence, Mourning, and Politics" concerning a loved one's death, "it is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself" (Butler 12). Lauren suffers from a severe blow to the meaning and the structure of her self and the world because she lost a

core element of her self that belonged to the other through the death of her beloved husband. In turn, the loss illumines the terrible hole in Lauren's self—her vulnerability to death, the irreversible loss of her self and the other.

The double movement of narrative in the first chapter now becomes internalized as Lauren's contradictory desires. In order to regain her sense of a whole self, Lauren desperately imposes a strictly linear frame of time in her thoughts and sentences. In her need to take control of her life back, she cleans the house, restocks the pantry that does not need restocking, and divides her time for meaningless yet systematic routines. She repeatedly calls these days after Rey's suicide as "the first days back," putting numerical order to highlight that these days are passing and becoming past fast. Lauren also desperately tries to think ahead of time, "always thinking into tomorrow" (36). In order to make time pass faster, Lauren organizes her time around fixed schedules. Her plan "was to organize time until she could live again (39)." Paradoxically, however, this desire to process the time as quickly as possible in order to move away from the trauma coexists with the desire to hold on to the previous moments with Rey or to return to them. For example, while cleaning the bathroom tile, she intentionally emphasizes the "pistol-grip" of the cleaning bottle she is using as if to repeat Rey's suicide in an unarticulated and futile attempt to understand the incident. She even feels it is "hard to stop pressing the trigger" while using the cleaning spray (36). She repeats to herself that "it was okay. She wanted to be here and she'd be okay," revealing that indeed she is not "okay" (35). The reason why Lauren feels that she will be "okay" in her lonely house is because "all their marriage, all the time they'd lived together they'd lived right here" (35). Lauren's return to the house, therefore, discloses her unspoken longing for the impossible return to the past.

The mysterious man Lauren finds on the third floor of her house stands in the vacuum

that this counteractive movement of the narrative creates. Named inadequately and condescendingly as Mr. Tuttle by Lauren, this man marks the absence of the impossible image, death, on the orderly linearity Lauren puts up around her. Because Lauren is so consciously focused on processing time after Rey's death, the most disturbing trait of Mr. Tuttle for her is his misuse of tense in his speech. One of the first things he said was "it rained very much" (46). Amusing herself by thinking he came out of cyberspace, Kotka of the free video stream, she corrects him: "It did not rain. It *will* rain" (47). Her effort to straighten his tense out is a part of her attempt to let him fit into the linear, one-directional time flow of the live video streaming. Nonetheless, Mr. Tuttle continues to nullify the most basic order of everyday life Lauren is trying to establish— time. As language registers time in a linear way, Lauren cannot figure Mr. Tuttle in her language: "It was always as if. He did this or that as if...She needed a reference elsewhere to get him placed (47)." In this sense, Mr. Tuttle resembles Rey's death that Lauren can hardly articulate in her thoughts. Like the leaf Lauren finds outside the window on the third floor when she went searching for Mr. Tuttle, this spectral figure exists "in midair, tuning" (43), without any attachment to the strands of the text, and thus marks an opening in symbolic and temporal order. While struggling to figure Mr. Tuttle into her speech composed of linear tenses, Lauren comes to understand that people "engender" "sequential order" in order to "make us safe in the world" (85).

Thus, as the skull-blot is useful for Lacan in illustrating the rupture in the symbolic order, so is Mr. Tuttle for DeLillo in illuminating the fissure that lies in the heart of narrative. Lauren does not take Mr. Tuttle to the town where anyone might recognize him; this reveals Lauren's ironical desire to own and control Mr. Tuttle in a distanced, safe and anonymous way. Mr. Tuttle's bland body, however, resists easy abstraction or flattening down to a mere image. When

Lauren came back from a shopping mall, he is sitting in his piss and shit. Mr. Tuttle's eating, peeing and shitting body presents itself as an undeniable, though inexplicable, material reality to Lauren. In this sense, Mr. Tuttle's body is a material presence that marks absence like Holbein's stain-skull. Using Hitchcock's movies to demonstrate Lacan's point, Zizek points out that Hitchcock closes on an anamorphic spot, that is, "something that sticks out." Hitchcock's movement from montage to closing in on the Gaze causes anxiety in the viewer. Parodying Lacan, Zizek calls this Gaze the "Hitchcockian blot" (88), the gaze of the other that reduces the viewer to an object. Mr. Tuttle, in this second part of the novel, is literally "the thing that sticks out," and his body presents what Lauren cannot directly see and try not to see.

As *The Body Artist* places the reader in Lauren's position, the reader is also made to face death, the ultimate black hole of time, through Mr. Tuttle's body and its function. The "surplus of vulnerability" that Lauren finds in Mr. Tuttle actually reflects Lauren's fear of death, and through her, it also becomes the reader's (98). By "sticking out," that is, refusing to be explained away, Mr. Tuttle puts what Lauren fears most in front of her and the reader. At first, Lauren detects Rey's gesture and her own voice from Mr. Tuttle's seemingly meaningless ranting. Later, Mr. Tuttle acts out Rey in voice and motion. In this way, Mr. Tuttle facilitates the impossible glance of death that nullify any process of time by absolutely stopping it: "She began to understand that she could not miss Rey, could not consider his absence, the loss of Rey, without thinking along the margins of Mr. Tuttle." (84) Looking into the eyes of Mr. Tuttle, Lauren realizes that the normal eyes project rather than receive: "The eye is supposed to shape and process and paint. It tells us a story we want to believe (82)."

One morning when Lauren is watching him, Mr. Tuttle returns her look by performing the whole morning when Rey last left Lauren; the morning the first chapter of *The Body Artist*

portrays. Mr. Tuttle repeats the scene of the morning starting from where the first chapter left off. By the end of the first chapter, Rey was looking for his car key, and Mr. Tuttle starts from where Lauren asks why he needs the car. Observing Mr. Tuttle incarnating the scene, Lauren confirms that “it did not seem an act of memory...It is happening now...Rey is alive now in this man’s mind, in his mouth and body and cock” (89). Here, again, Mr. Tuttle is the phallic blot that “sticks out” of the text, unsettling readers along with Lauren and inducing the uncanny sense of temporal dislocation. Through Mr. Tuttle, the past erupts into the present. The spectral figure serves as the place-marker of the empty space where Rey had been, and the empty space reflects the irreparable loss that lies behind Lauren’s desire.

Furthermore, the immediate present-ness of this past scene, repeatedly highlighted by the text, overturns the meaning and the order of the present as something that comes after “the past” and before “the future.” For the reader, this temporal fissure disrupts her linear act of reading once again. She is reading the scene for the first time, yet it is already another return to the previous point of the narrative. As the reader return to the past of the narrative later, she is reminded of the signs of “the present” already fracturing the past. For example, the short pale hair Lauren picked out of her mouth in the first chapter is most likely Mr. Tuttle’s; Lauren picks up the same hair from her mouth while she washes Mr. Tuttle. As the text thus haunts its reader, she can never safely regard the novel as an easily consumable cultural commodity.

However, after encountering the gaze, the subject quickly begins to work on regaining its subject status. According to Lacan, the subject struggles to “symbolize his own vanishing and punctiform bar(train) in the illusion of the consciousness of seeing oneself see oneself, in which the gaze is elided” (Lacan 83). Indeed, the repetition of the past, even though it is a traumatic experience, does have its attraction for Lauren, as she can visualize herself looking at the scene

as “the image was in front of her”: “She feels something has separated, softly come unfixed, and she tries to pull him down to the floor with her, stop him, keep him here, or crawls up onto him or into him, dissolving, or only lies prone and sobs unstoppably, being watched by herself from above.” (90) Here, Lauren is seeing herself doing what she could have done, what she wished to have done, and this aggravates the feeling that the chance has passed forever, but at the same time, seeing herself in this way helps her to admit the fact that it has passed so that she can move on. Because Lauren believes that time is what “defines your existence” (94), she needs to have confidence in the linear experience of time in order to live on.

As a result, by the time Mr. Tuttle disappears, Lauren clears and arranges her thoughts as the anxiety and the confusion that has congealed around Mr. Tuttle abates. However, at the moment when the reader, along with Lauren, is ready to brush off Mr. Tuttle as “a retarded man sadly gifted in certain specialized areas” (102) and veer a way from the speck of doubt people intentionally forget to live their lives in an orderly way, she experience another surprising turn of the text. Lauren, in front of the reader, turns back and gazes into the reader’s eyes.

Lauren’s transformation is particularly disturbing because her “depigmented” body uncannily resembles that of Mr. Tuttle’s. In fact, Lauren has begun transforming soon after Rey’s death. After she recovers from food poisoning, she resumes her bodyworks with breathing exercises. This first exercises are designed to assure Lauren of the fact that she is alive. After finding Mr. Tuttle, Lauren begins to work her body hard to extend the limits of her body. At this stage, she thinks that “her body work made everything transparent” (59), because while timing her movements with her breathing, she feels “what it means to be alive” (60). Her breaths and heartbeats provide Lauren an alternative way of conceptualizing time in an orderly way, a way that she thinks is threatened by Mr. Tuttle’s speech and existence. Her body, up until this stage,

serves Lauren as an anchor for her existence. Finally, however, Lauren starts to erase her identity from her body. It is as if she starts to embody the void that lies at the heart of her self. She begins by cleaning her body, but goes on to remove indicators of her identity as completely as possible: “This was her work, to disappear from all her former venues of aspect and bearing and to become a blankness, a body slate erased of every past resemblance” (86). Soon after, Mr. Tuttle disappears, and in the place of the spectral man, Lauren stands, transformed into “someone who is classically unseen, the person you are trained to look through”—another version of Mr. Tuttle (86).

DeLillo make sure that the reader receives “the uncanny” impression by employing a different narrator for the scene where the reader confronts the unfamiliar in their familiar heroine. The second inserted article, “Body Art in Extremis: Slow, Spare and Painful,” is written by Mariella, Lauren’s friend. Because Mariella interviews Lauren, the reader is now positioned outside Lauren, and made to look at Lauren. Because the reader was made to accompany Lauren when she so often imagined herself talking to Mariella about Mr. Tuttle, this reversed scene contains uncanny repetition for the reader. According to Mariella, Lauren is “colorless, bloodless and ageless” (105), and this description reminds the reader of Mr. Tuttle whose aspect had “a thinness of physical address” (48). In Lauren’s long performance piece called “Body Time,” the reader witnesses Lauren literally morph into a “naked man...stripped of recognizable language and culture”—Mr. Tuttle (109). Moreover, when Mariella asks about Rey’s death, in front of Mariella’s and the reader’s eyes, Lauren “switches to another voice. It is his voice, the naked man’s spooky as a woodwind in your closet. Not taped but live. Not lip-sync’d but real. It is speaking to me and I search my friend’s face but don’t quite see her” (11). Mariella cannot but “freeze in [her] seat” (11), because this time, it is not performance. Through the multiple layers

of afterimage, the text now makes the reader witness Lauren performing Mr. Tuttle performing Rey. In this way, the text begins to return to the reader on its own. The text defies the reader's desire to comprehend and finish it, making the reader come back and stare at the speck that turns out to be a skull that returns her gaze.

During the interview, Lauren mentions “vanity” as an essence of herself as an actor. Her use of the term almost directly invites Lacan's famous interpretation of Holbein's picture. According to Lacan, *The Ambassadors* describes “a series of objects that represent in the painting of the period the symbols of vanitas” (88), and the skull, once discovered, rearranges the meaning of the vanitas expressed in the picture. Lauren's use of the term “vanity” shows that she is mindful of the similar meaning: “It's vanity. That's all it is...But sanity is essential to an actor. It's an emptiness. This is where the word come from. And this is what I work toward and build on” (106). If Lauren's “Body Time” is a work of vanity, the emptiness that stands in the middle of it—the stain that turns out to be a skull-- is Lauren's colorless body. Therefore, what happens to the spectator of *The Ambassadors* also happens to the audience of Lauren's piece and the reader of *The Body Artist*; the secret of the picture and the piece “is given at the moment when, moving slightly away, little by little, to the left, then turning around, we see what the magical floating object signifies. It reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death's head” (Lacan 92).

The distress of the exposure is amplified for the reader of *The Body Artist* as this is her second time experiencing it. First, the reader is made to walk away from the breakfast scene of the first chapter to look back see Mr. Tuttle, “the death's head,” already embedded in the scene. Now, the reader is positioned away from Lauren, who served her as her eyes for the most part of the novel, and discover Mr. Tuttle overlapping her. The reader is caught in her wish to see the

narrative over—her desire to be confirmed of the fact that “time is the only narrative that matters. It stretches events and makes it possible for us to suffer and come out of it and see death happen and come out of it” (94). This narrative, instead, comes back, haunting the reader with its “death-head” again and again. In turn, the reader, like the observer of a painting, becomes the object of the text at the moment when the “paradoxical point undermines our position as ‘neutral, objective’ observer...it is the point from which the picture [text] itself looks back at us” (Zizek 91).

After this unsettling moment, the last chapter makes another return on various levels. Lauren is back on the lonely house on the shore, still looks at Kotka through the internet, and her phone is still ringing. However, this is not an exact repetition. Lauren is back in the house as Mr. Tuttle said she would be, but Lauren is now capable of articulating “death” in her thoughts. She has learned to recognize her loss consciously and open herself to it: “Why shouldn’t the death of a person you love bring you into lurid ruin? You don’t know how to love the ones you love until they disappear abruptly. Then you understand how thinly distance from their suffering, how sparing of self you often were, only rarely unguarded of hear, working you networks of give-and-take” (118). However, this “lesson” is not final as the narrator adds, right after the above sentences, that “she held these ideas every way she was” (118), implying that these are Lauren’s ideas that she is trying on for the moment.

Thus, DeLillo makes sure that the returns of this novel are not a cyclical movement that has its own comfort. If there is a lesson intended by DeLillo by this return, it is this: to be oneself “less and less” (119). Nor does the novel end with a satisfying closure; it ends with a gesture of opening up. In the last scene, Lauren repeats what she so often did before in the novel: she walks up the stairs, and enters her bedroom intensely hoping to see Rey back in their bedroom. Only

this time, the pronoun “he” Lauren wishes to encounter implies Mr. Tuttle too. Again, however, Lauren is disappointed. In the last paragraph, Lauren opens up the window, wanting to “feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was” (126). After making the reader look back to discover the unexpected “death’s head” so many times, the very ending of *The Body Artist* opens itself up yet again for future haunting—another unpredictable encounter with the gaze that terrorizes the reader to tell her who she is. The Gaze, born from the many returns of the text, haunts the reader, forcing her to face the crucial void lying in the core of her reading practice and her self.

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