AESTHETIC MOURNING AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF TIME IN DON DELILLO'S THE BODY ARTIST

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Abstract: *This article reads Don DeLillo's The Body Artist (2001) as a defining work of late-postmodern mourning, one in which grief is not organized through narrative progression but reimagined through an aesthetic suspension of time. Focusing on the notion of "Body Time," the study argues that DeLillo dissolves linear, sequential temporality into a spatialized experience of duration that formally registers the psychic disorientation of bereavement. Engaging recent critical work by Philipp Wolf, Stefania Iliescu, Peter Boxall, and Tom Muir, the article shows how temporal deceleration, narrative stasis, and shifts in scale operate as deliberate aesthetic strategies. Rather than guiding mourning toward resolution or meaning, DeLillo's late style renders grief as a condition to be endured—an ongoing presence marked by stillness, repetition, and suspended time. In The Body Artist, loss becomes neither narratively recoverable nor symbolically resolved, but inhabitable and unresolved, structured as a permanent architecture of temporal arrest.*

Introduction

In Don DeLillo's later fiction, mourning is no longer framed as a psychological process unfolding across narrative time, nor as a traumatic rupture that demands explanation or repair. Works such as *The Body Artist*

instead approach grief as a temporal condition—an altered way of inhabiting time itself. Central to this reorientation is the idea of "Body Time," a concept that gestures beyond embodied duration toward a fundamental reworking of temporality, one in which linear succession gives way to an extended, suspended present.

Critics have increasingly noted that this transformation of time is not merely thematic but formal. The novel's sparse prose, minimal narrative development, and sustained attention to small, repetitive bodily actions produce what has often been described as an atmosphere of stasis or even monotony. Yet this apparent "numbing banality" is not a stylistic failure. On the contrary, it constitutes the novel's central aesthetic and ethical commitment: to draw the reader into an experience of time stripped of narrative momentum, mirroring the lived temporality of bereavement.

This article argues that *The Body Artist* reconceives mourning as an aesthetic mode by sublating chronological time into a spatial continuum of duration. Through temporal slowing, narrative suspension, and a reduction of scale, DeLillo constructs a literary form that does not explain grief but renders it sensorially present. In doing so, the novel marks a decisive turn in DeLillo's post-2000 writing, away from the hyperreal excess of earlier works and toward a minimal, embodied engagement with time, loss, and presence.

Temporal Deceleration and the "Living Still Life"

One of the most striking formal features of *The Body Artist* is its radical slowing of time. As Philipp Wolf observes, DeLillo's prose forces the reader to experience duration almost physically, as something dense, resistant, and oppressive. Time no longer functions as an invisible medium through which events pass; it becomes perceptible in its own right, pressing against consciousness rather than receding into the background.

Wolf characterizes "Body Time" as an ascetic aesthetic practice. In the wake of her husband Rey's suicide, Lauren Hartke organizes her days around repetitive bodily routines that aim not at progress or recovery but at holding time in suspension—at stopping it, stretching it, or opening it outward. Her performance art, which later gives public form to her grief, is grounded in the body's capacity to resist speed and abstraction. In this sense, Lauren's body becomes a counter-technology, opposing the acceleration and disembodiment that characterize contemporary life.

Wolf's description of DeLillo's aesthetic as a "living still life" is particularly illuminating. Unlike a painted still life, which freezes its object in representation, DeLillo's stillness remains durational and alive. Time does not cease; it lingers. The reader is invited to inhabit this lingering, to experience time not as a sequence of actions but as sustained presence. Crucially, this aesthetic offers no promise of healing. It refuses narrative consolation and insists instead on remaining with the discomfort of duration itself.

Narrative Choreography and Duration as Sensation

Stefania Iliescu extends this account by describing *The Body Artist* as a work of "narrative choreography." Rather than advancing plot, the novel stages movements, pauses, and micro-events that choreograph time within the narrative space. DeLillo's focus on what Iliescu calls "submicroscopic moments"—a falling paper clip, the movement of light, the sound of breathing—produces what she terms a "moment-sensation."

These moments do not accumulate toward meaning or resolution. Instead, they intensify perception, making the reader feel the thickness and resistance of time. In the aftermath of trauma, Iliescu suggests, time is no longer experienced as flow but as pressure. DeLillo's refusal of ellipsis, climax, or explanatory framing reproduces this pressure at the level of form.

Iliescu situates this aesthetic within a broader shift in DeLillo's post-2000 fiction, where attention moves away from media saturation and hyperreality toward embodiment and perception. In *The Body Artist*, images do not operate as detached simulacra but acquire narrative substance, merging with the characters' sensory experience. Time, in this context, ceases to be a narrative structure and becomes a felt, corporeal phenomenon

Suspension and the "Nontime of Bereavement"

The novel's persistent sense of temporal arrest finds theoretical grounding in Peter Boxall's concept of the "nontime of bereavement." Writing on DeLillo's late style, Boxall argues that mourning produces a stalled temporality in which narrative progression collapses. The bereaved subject occupies what he describes as a "little hollow of nontime," emptied of expectation and forward movement.

Within this evacuated temporal zone, the future no longer appears open or emergent. Instead, it seems paradoxically complete yet unreachable—laid out but unoccurring. Time loses its narrative function and becomes something one enters rather than something one moves through. This condition is powerfully realized in *The Body Artist*, where days pass without differentiation and the boundaries between past, present, and future blur.

Boxall links this suspended temporality to a broader historical exhaustion characteristic of late modernity. The inability to imagine a future beyond repetition and return manifests as a hesitation within narrative form itself. DeLillo's prose, in this sense, falters deliberately, registering what it means to exist in a world where teleological structures have lost their force.

Disappearance, Scale, and Intellectual Miniaturisation

Tom Muir's notion of "intellectual miniaturisation" offers a complementary lens through which to view DeLillo's aesthetic of

disappearance. Muir argues that DeLillo increasingly situates human experience against vast temporal scales—geological, cosmic, or evolutionary—thereby diminishing the narrative centrality of individual life. In *The Body Artist*, this shift transforms grief from a dramatic event into a vanishing point.

Muir's concept of "shadow language" is particularly pertinent. The novel's pared-down, fragmentary language does not recount events so much as gesture toward metaphysical uncertainty. Even basic narrative verbs such as "to tell" lose their authority, becoming markers of hesitation rather than meaning. Language withdraws from storytelling and instead signals absence.

By placing personal loss within a temporal scale that far exceeds individual duration, DeLillo neutralizes what earlier literary traditions framed as epiphanic "spots of time." Moments no longer crystallize significance; they dissolve. Grief becomes abstracted and enigmatic, resisting both narrative representation and emotional resolution.

Conclusion: Aesthetic Mourning as Temporal Architecture

Taken together, these critical perspectives reveal *The Body Artist* as a novel in which mourning is not resolved, narrated, or overcome, but aesthetically inhabited. DeLillo's notion of "Body Time" transforms grief into a spatialized duration—a temporal architecture rather than a recoverable loss. Narrative slowing, suspension, and shifts in scale function not as stylistic excess but as deliberate refusals: refusals of speed, closure, and narrative mastery.

An instructive analogy is that of a glass shattering in extreme slow motion. In conventional narrative time, attention gravitates toward impact and aftermath. In *The Body Artist*, the glass never fully falls. Each fragment remains suspended, forming a silent structure of loss that can be circled and examined

but never resolved. The space between the fragments—the thickness of empty time—becomes the true object of attention.

In this way, DeLillo's late fiction offers a distinctly contemporary vision of mourning: not as a process that concludes, but as a condition that endures; not as narrative recovery, but as aesthetic stillness. *The Body Artist* thus stands as a key text in DeLillo's exploration of trauma, temporality, and the fragile persistence of the embodied self.

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