



The Living Dead in the Long Downturn: Im/Possible Communism and Zombie Narrative Form

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Doors yield, ripped from their mounts, crashing down to inertia.
Force surges forward. Danaäns burst in through the entrance and slaughter
Front-line defenders, then fill the whole breadth of the courtyard with soldiers,
Wilder than foaming floodwaters bursting escape through the levees,
Sweeping all structures set in their way with their violent torrents. (Virgil 2007: 43-44)

Nothing is so horrible as the anger of a mob when it rages for blood and strangles its defenceless prey. Then there rolled through the streets a dark flood of human beings, in which, here and there, workmen in their shirt-sleeves seemed like the white caps of a raging sea, and all were howling and roaring—all merciless, heathenish, devilish. (Heine 1929: 171)

The ocean had overtaken the streets, as if the news programs' global warming simulations had finally come to pass [...]. Except it was not water that flooded the grid but the dead. [...]. The things were shoulder to shoulder across the entire width of the avenue [...]. All the misery of the world channeled through this concrete canyon, the lament into which the human race was being transformed person by person. [...]. The barrier was a dam now, suppressing the roiling torrent of the wasteland. It would not hold. (Whitehead 2011: 243-44)

[T]he approaching flood has no name. [...]. I know something is rolling toward us in the darkness and the world can end in more ways than one. (Neel 2018: 175)

Morbid Symptoms

Zone One, Colson Whitehead's fifth and, arguably, best novel, begins with an architectural memento mori.¹ Mark Spitz, the novel's protagonist, remembers visiting

¹ An earlier, shorter version of this article is forthcoming in German as "Lebende Tote im langen Abschwung: Colson Whiteheads *Zone One* (2011) und die Katastrophe der Kapitalakkumulation." *Literarische Perspektiven auf den Kapitalismus: Fallbeispiele aus dem 21. Jahrhundert*. Ed. Annika



his uncle's apartment located in a Downtown Manhattan skyscraper. What he sees is this:

Yesterday's old masters, stately named and midwifed by once-famous architects, were insulted by the soot of combustion engines and by technological advances in construction. Time chiseled at elegant stonework, which swirled or plummeted to the sidewalk in dust and chips and chunks. Behind the façades their insides were butchered, reconfigured, rewired according to the era's new theories of utility. Classic six into studio honeycomb, sweatshop killing floor into cordoned cubicle mill. (2011: 5-6)

But while it is time itself that chips away at the stone façades, the passage is not primarily concerned with natural processes of decay. There is yet another "mechanism" transforming the "metropolis" (4)—it's the economy, stupid. The changes described by the narrator index what has been called a shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism, that is, the replacement of sites of material production by offices in which services are performed, all the while anthropomorphizing the edifices thus transformed. They are midwifed, insulted, and finally butchered. Several pages later, in the diegetic present, Mark Spitz recalls stepping onto a balcony and seeing "the withered stunts of the old Jersey docks," and these are likened to "[r]emnants of a dead, seafaring era of trade and commerce" (57). Again the novel deploys its protagonist in an elevated position, thus providing readers with the literary equivalent of an aerial shot, as it were, that allows a passing glance at the results of long-term processes of socio-economic change. The urban buildings are butchered; the deserted port reminds Mark Spitz of "rotten teeth in a monstrous jaw" (58). In short, the history of the built environment of capitalist society is marked by violence and monstrosity.

The narrator's diction, rendering in free indirect discourse Mark Spitz's impressions, is not gratuitous, however, but contingent on an experience our protagonist had only moments before. His recollection of viewing the docks as "rotten teeth" is triggered by the view of the "broken teeth" (57) of a zombie, from whom he has just barely been saved. The monstrosity of the built environment is, thus, articulated with the transformation of humans into monsters. In fact, the latter is foreshadowed in the very beginning. From his uncle's apartment, Mark Spitz sees

[p]ieces of citizens [which] were on display in the windows, arranged by a curator with a taste for non sequitur: the splayed pinstriped legs of an urban golfer putting into a colander; half a lady's torso, wrapped in a turquoise blazer, as glimpsed through a trapezoid; a fist trembling on a titanium desk. (5)

Later, readers will realize that this passage had an anticipatory function, as the fragmented bodies that enter Mark Spitz's visual field prefigure the "all-too-literal

Gonnermann, Sina Schuhmaier, and Lisa Schwander. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 255-75. I am grateful to my co-editors for giving me the opportunity to "reanimate" (in Cord's felicitous expression) and revise my article for this publication.



dissolution of human beings into body parts” (Hoberek 2012: 409) that the novel will describe again and again. The early glance at the butchered metropolis, then, already implies that this process will not leave its inhabitants intact—as, indeed, it won’t.

Whitehead’s novel is divided into three chapters each of which narrates the events of a single day, while being interrupted by numerous analepses in which readers learn about the protagonist’s past. The plot revolves around Mark Spitz, who combs through the eponymous “Zone One” in Downtown Manhattan along with two so-called “sweepers,” looking for zombies who have survived—though that term is hopelessly inadequate, of course—a prior assault by US Marines. A wall on Canal Street protects the zone from the onrushing zombies, but—as is to be expected due to the generic conventions of zombie narratives—eventually breaks down. On the third day, the living dead flood the streets, and in the ensuing carnage Mark Spitz, like a post-apocalyptic Edna Pontellier, finally decides to “walk[] into the sea of the dead” (259). *Zone One* ends with him leaving his hiding place and submitting to an uncertain fate.

All of this is to say that *Zone One*, from Mark Spitz’s childhood glances at New York City “churning below” (5) to his final resigned resolution to commit suicide by zombie, revolves around a ruthless logic that seems to offer no way out. Technological modernization—what Marxists in the olden days used to call the development of the productive forces—is represented as a violent process that leaves monsters in its wake and offers humans “nowhere to go” (Boggs 2009: 36). In this article I will comment on Whitehead’s novel and its political unconscious as well as on some of the most ambitious recent attempts to make sense of the impasses of the present and the im/possibility of revolution from the perspective of the Marxian critique of political economy. Whitehead’s zombies in particular and the figure of the post-1968 living dead in general are best regarded as symptoms of the “long downturn” (Brenner 2006), that is, the protracted and unresolved crisis of industrial profitability induced by the competition-driven need for individual capitals to introduce new technologies that has affected global capitalism for the last half century.²

It is, in short, no coincidence that the zombie re-emerges as a flesh-eating monster in George A. Romero’s genre-defining *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968, at a moment when unemployment “began ticking upward and became ‘structural’” (Zamora 2013) in advanced capitalist nations. In my reading I will show how this informs Whitehead’s novel—and, by way of implication, most sophisticated zombie narratives as well—both thematically and formally. I read the zombies’ insatiable desire for human flesh as

² For an extended analysis of the way literature and culture articulate a “precarious present” in the transition from long boom to long downturn that uses many of the same points of reference—Marx, Brenner, communization theory—as this article, see O’Brien (2018). See also “Marx After Growth,” a four-part lecture in which O’Brien provides an excellent introduction to the Marxian critique of political economy and discusses the implications of the long crisis for “an anti-capitalist politics today” (2020).



symptomatic of the tension between their irreducible need to consume and their inability to do so in the only way that is legitimate in societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails; that is, by using money to purchase commodities. Thus, the post-1968 zombie dramatizes the fate of pauperism or what Marx calls the “lowest sediment of the relative surplus population” (1990: 797) that cannot sell its labor-power for a wage due to a shrinking demand but remains forced to eat to reproduce themselves all the same. Faced with the alternative of starving to death—a second, physical, death to be suffered after their first, social, death—the zombies spontaneously take to the streets and threaten to “make total destroy” (Cunningham 2012). But instead of seeing in the living dead’s unflinching antagonism toward the order of things an “imaginary resolution of a real contradiction” (Jameson 2002: 63) providing, if only allegorically, insight into the shape of a possible real, or practical, resolution/revolution, I will read the difficulty to provide compelling closure to zombie narratives as a symptom—one of Gramsci’s “morbid symptoms,” coming to the fore when “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (276)—of a crisis in revolutionary theory and practice. This world, *Zone One* like so many other recent cultural artifacts, seems to say is beyond redemption; its destruction is entirely possible; another world is necessary. But to conceive how to get there from here seems almost impossible.

Monsters of Reproduction

The story of the zombie begins, as is well-known, on Saint-Domingue under French colonial rule (see Luckhurst 2016). Building on motifs taken from West African belief systems that were probably fused in a syncretistic manner with the colonizer’s Catholicism, the notion of the living dead, beings lacking self-consciousness but forced to perform hard labor, first emerged. This notion of the mindless zombie worker was resurrected, as it were, under the occupation of Haiti by American troops lasting from 1915 to 1934, and was made known to the American public by William Seabrook’s 1929 travelogue *The Magic Island*. Soon after, the American culture industry appropriated the living dead, and the first zombie films were released. These, however, have little in common with the late capitalist monsters omnipresent in today’s popular culture. Sarah Juliet Lauro, in her comprehensive account of the zombie myth’s transatlantic migration, proposes to treat it not merely as “a myth about slavery,” but also as a “slave metaphor”:

the figure first allegorized the displacement of the African to the cane plantations of the Caribbean and, under the glare of colonial imperialism, the transformation of the human into an instrument. [It] has a history—as a myth—that uncannily parallels its own substance, and it has a structure that appositely reflects the matter of the metaphor. [...]. This metaphor comes to be taken up in the twentieth century by the heirs of the oppressors to exorcize the demons of the descendants



of empire. It is [...] a “slave metaphor”: usurped, colonized, and altered to represent the struggles of a distinctly different culture. (2015: 17)

This argument, which formally recalls Saidiya Hartman’s critique of the way white Americans, who in the nineteenth century empathically identified with enslaved Blacks to make legible the latter’s suffering, ended up confirming “the fungibility of the captive body” that easily ended up becoming a “vessel” for their “uses” and concerns (1997: 19), might, however, remain insufficiently attentive to the altered socio-historical context in which the zombie was resurrected in 1968 by George A. Romero. That is to say, an adequate historicization of the latter’s ghouls and their heirs will have to explain precisely why they assumed the shape of flesh-eating monsters that do not and, most pertinently, cannot perform work. If the zombies of old were emblems of degrading labor under conditions of total heteronomy, it is common today to regard them as “mindless consumers,” as David McNally puts it (2012: 213). His book *Monsters of the Market* is a commendable study of the monstrous fantasies that have emerged in reaction to the universalization of capitalist social property relations, but he merely regards the zombies’ transformation from worker to consumer as a story of decline in which their critical potential goes astray. Here, the zombie becomes a toothless avatar of the culture industry, just when it begins to bite.

At first glance, there is something to this argument. As every Marxist knows, an anti-capitalism that merely zeroes in on presumably wrong consumerist practices, all the while ignoring the social organization of the production, distribution, and exchange of commodities, is entirely useless. But then, zombie films, beginning with Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), often seem to satirically equate the consciousness of the zombies, whose actions appear to entirely lack volition, with the putative state of ignorance of modern shoppers and their desire for this or that commodity. Evan Calder Williams has shown that the critique of consumerism thus expressed is ultimately reactionary and marked by an elitist contempt for the consuming masses. Romero’s film, famously set in an abandoned shopping mall, performs a “division of the world into two,” into mindless consumers and “[t]hose who know better than everyone, who don’t buy into buying,” offering its enlightened viewers the chance to be “on the right side of the divide” (2010: 97-98). Even more, it promises its audience the “pleasure” (100) of fantasizing about simply getting rid of these “deplorables” (Hillary Rodham Clinton) in a manner most gruesome, thus expressing typically left liberal resentments against proletarian desires and supplying an immodest proposal on how to solve the problem.³

³ If the left-liberal zombie film offers a fictional space to fulfill the wish of getting back at an “underclass” defined by its apparently pathological culture, expressed by wrong choices and false desires, right-wing zombie narratives such as William Kaufman’s *Daylight’s End* (2016) rely on a thinly veiled “anti-black racist and chauvinist anti-immigration message” in which the zombie horde stands in for both internal and external outsiders defined by an alleged natural difference (Büscher-Ulbrich 2018: 387; on the poverty of the “scholarly myth” of the “underclass,” see Wacquant 2011: 162).



So, if the satire on consumerism was all there is to Romero's films and the zombie genre, their anti-capitalist perspective would be very limited, indeed.

First, it is useful to reflect on the status of consumption itself. Often, two semantic levels overlap. The criticism of consumerism relies on a discourse about consumers as individuals who purchase the wrong commodities, whatever those may be. In this case, the practice in question is a purchase. On the other hand, one can consume, say, drugs; here, consumption refers not to the sale, but the use of the substance. In short, we are talking about profoundly different actions. Either a commodity changes hands in exchange for money, or it is used, negated, in short, consumed. To be sure, in capitalist societies, in which human beings lack immediate access to the products of labor produced by others, the two actions are mediated: I cannot consume the object of my desire without first purchasing it; at the same time, the decision to purchase it is always-already informed by my desire to acquire a specific use-value with the purpose of consuming it. Nonetheless, the two practices remain formally distinct, and it makes sense to reserve the term consumption for the act of using a product of labor. In making this distinction, one can follow Marx who discusses the relationship between production, distribution, exchange, and consumption in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*. Here, consumption is defined as an act of "individual appropriation" of the product qua "object[] of gratification" (1993: 89), as in "taking in food" through which "the human being produces its body" (90). As a matter of fact, the criticism of consumerism that reproaches individuals for buying the wrong commodities is actually concerned with acts of exchange rather than acts of consumption.⁴ And yet, it should hardly be necessary to point out that zombies cannot engage in exchange, but only in the immediate consumption of use-values. They do not pay, but directly appropriate the objects they need to reproduce their very corporeal existence, bloody, putrid, fragmented, and all. Sure enough, the objects consumed by the zombies are commonly rather referred to as subjects—they eat human beings.

It becomes possibly to conjecture, then, that what is ultimately scandalous about the post-1968 flesh-eaters is not their destabilization of ontology, epistemology, or ethics (see Swanson 2014: 383), but their relation to political economy. Their consumption consists of an appropriation of use-values beyond monetarily mediated exchange. As Evan Calder Williams, who has addressed this issue, writes, their "enjoyment is no longer mediated through the value-form but through a gory mining of the potential hunger-sating use-value of one's friends and neighbors" (2010: 95). That is to say, the zombies are human, all too human, and merely very hungry, yet very much incapable of

⁴ This conflation of exchange and consumption has a peculiar ideological effect by shifting the discourse from the socio-structural level—exchange, which, by definition, includes two parties, a buyer and a seller—to the personal: it ends up knowing nothing but individuals and their preferences—as in neoclassical economics which approaches economic forms from the perspective of "the individual in need or an individual's relation to an object" (Stützle 2015: 183; my translation).



buying a snack—and so they take it where they can get it. This, much more than their undead status, is what effects their exclusion from the realm of human subjectivity. The “legal subject” is, according to Soviet legal theorist Evgeny Pashukanis, nothing but “the abstract commodity owner elevated to the heavens” (2003: 121); subjects count as such only insofar as they are “people with products at their disposal,” who exclusively alienate their property—whether its a product or the ability to perform labor—in accordance with “a conscious act of will” (112). This relationship, based on the commodity owner’s mutual recognition of their wills ideally takes the form of a “contract” (121). Yet, zombies are constitutively ignorant of the other’s intentions and will and anyway lousy contractual partners,⁵ which is why they represent the structural antithesis of the subject form—non-personifications of economic relations or personifications of non-economic relations, as it were (after Marx 1990: 179). They allegorize the exclusion from the sphere of simple commodity circulation which is tendentially equivalent to the exclusion from the human species in capitalist modernity (Postone 2003: 112 n. 44).⁶ The fictional figure, however, is the product of a displacement: a political-economic relation is represented in the form of ontological difference, as the difference between the living and the living dead.

What remains to be determined is why this zombie made its appearance in movie theaters between 1968 when *The Night of the Living Dead* was released and 1978 when its sequel, *Dawn of the Dead*, consolidated Romero’s creation of a new genre. The ontological, epistemological, and ethical problems posed by the zombie—what is the difference between life and death, how can this be recognized without a doubt, and what are the consequences for practical conduct?—might be transhistorical (cf. Swanson 2014: 384); being excluded from capitalist commodity exchange, on the other hand, is a historically specific issue. In capitalist societies the overwhelming majority of human beings relies on the payment of a wage—whether they receive it personally or are the

⁵ “To make Covenants with bruit Beasts,” writes Hobbes, “is impossible,” as “without mutuall acceptation, there is no Covenant” (1996: 97).

⁶ Actually existing subjects, needless to say, do not cease to be perceived as embodying humanity in the abstract the minute they no longer engage in acts of exchange. The zombie narrative, then, imagines a diegetic world which begins to concretize the abstract logic of capital, as it were; in which, that is, there are really only subjects qua abstract commodity owners and non-subjects. In the phenomenal world, the “essence of a category,” such as that of the legal subject as conceptualized by Pashukanis or Marx, is not identical with its “forms of appearance” (Surplus Club 2015). The latter (to simplify a great deal) are mediated by all sorts of political and cultural institutions which ascribe social identities and sanction conditions of belonging or exclusion. The zombies are zombies, however, not because they are politically denied “recognizability,” in Judith Butler’s words (2010: 5). Instead, they are rendered abject through intangible and impersonal causal mechanisms that cannot be reduced to the evil intentions of any political actor (see footnote 8 below)—and, thus, they invite a Marxian reading such as the one put forward here. For an intriguing reading of Marx’s account of the “impersonality” of the “modern form of domination,” see Roberts (2017: 82-93). This is also why I do not address Giorgio Agamben’s influential theory of “bare life,” which proposes to treat “misery and exclusion” as “eminently political concepts” rather than “economic or social ones” (1998: 179). As Fredric Jameson puts it, in Marx we discover “a form of ‘naked life’ far more deeply rooted in the economic system itself” (2010: 125) which is expressed symptomatically by the post-1968 zombie.



dependents of a wage-earner—to have access to “the products of isolated and mutually independent private labours” performed by others (Marx 1990: 132; translation revised). Lacking money to purchase use-values while remaining forced to consume to reproduce one’s body is, thus, the predicament of those who do not engage in wage labor permanently. This is the tragedy of “not being exploited,” as Michael Denning put it (2010: 79) or the ever-present problem of “the contingency of proletarian reproduction” (Hansen 2015). The excessive violence of zombies eviscerating and devouring their victims that serves as a generic mark of distinction can be deciphered as a representation that has undergone a sort of Freudian “reversal” (1958: 327): the violence that is actually at stake in the zombie narrative’s gory spectacle is the violence suffered by those condemned to starve without access to the universal equivalent that offers its owners immediate access to “the whole world of gratifications” (Marx 1993: 222), including the bare necessities such as food and drink, despite the fact that their needs could easily be met. “Hunger is hunger,” writes Marx in the *Grundrisse*, “but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail, and tooth” (1993: 92). The factor determining the type of consumption is, according to Marx, production. Thus, one would be well-advised to look at the history of capitalist production after 1968 that has resulted in a situation in which the figure of the zombie, whose hunger is sated by the devouring of raw flesh “with the aid of hand, nail, and tooth” has become incredibly popular.

Temporary Apocalypse

First, however, it is useful to return to Whitehead’s novel for a moment. Like most post-Romero contributions to the genre, *Zone One* offers a variation on the theme of the flesh-eating ghoul. There are “skels,” which resemble the monsters seen in films and television series, but also “stragglers.” The latter remain frozen in one pose apathetically and offer the narrator, who mostly renders the protagonist’s thoughts in free indirect discourse, a chance to reflect on the zombies’ meaning without immediately being exposed to danger (Swanson 2014: 396). The skels, on the other hand, appear in the shape of a homogeneous mass whose members have been freed of all sociological classifications. Categories like race, gender, nationality, or religion have apparently lost all meaning in this post-catastrophic world. “The city did not care for story,” the narrator claims, for your “particular narrative” (Whitehead 2011: 243).

No matter the hue of their skins, dark or light, no matter the names of their gods or the absences they countenanced [...]. Now they were mostly mouths and fingers, fingers for extracting entrails from soft cavities, and mouths to rend and devour in pieces the distinct human faces they captured, that these faces might become less



distinct, de-individuated flaps of masticated flesh, rendered anonymous, like them, the dead. (243-44)

That is to say, the zombies have been reduced to the body parts necessary to consume in the most basic manner: “mouths and fingers” (Whitehead) or “hand, nail, and tooth” (Marx). The threat they pose is, moreover, not so much death per se; instead, the zombies figure as an “allegory of proletarianization [...], where the proletariat is a[n] undead] humanity-without-qualities” (Bernes 2019) that is separated from any socially legitimate access to consumer goods. Moreover, they forcefully compel all surviving humans to become zombies themselves. In a word, they create a world after their own image.

From the perspective of the provisional US government that has set up camp in Buffalo, there appears to be no doubt that this fate can be averted. The world conjured up by the novel has not actually descended into a Hobbesian state of nature, but has even stabilized to some degree after the unexplained beginning of the catastrophe—and Whitehead’s authorial decision, echoing Romero, to focus on a post-catastrophic authoritarian state rather than a complete breakdown of social relations is what makes his novel both more realistic and prophetic. Writes Jonathan Neale in an article discussing the very real threat of “climate social collapse” and

what you see over and over in the dystopian movies. There are little groups of savages wandering the roads [...]. That is not remotely what it’s going to be like. The fantasy of disorganized savages goes back to the ugly ruling class British thinker Hobbes in the seventeenth century. He believed that only the firm supervision of the state prevented a war of all against all. This is a long running fantasy among all elites, because their deepest fear is that the rest of us will loosen their iron grip. Almost none of those horrors (of the 20th century) were committed by small groups of savages wandering through the ruins. They were committed by States, and by mass political movements. Society did not disintegrate. It did not come apart. Society intensified. Power concentrated, and split, and those powers had us kill each other [...]. Our new rulers will fan the flames of new racisms. They will explain why we must keep out the hordes of hungry homeless the other side of the wall. Why, regrettably, we have to shoot them or let them drown. Why, unfortunately, we are running out of food for the refugee camps in the desert the other side of the wall or across the channel. Why the people on this side of the wall who look like the people on the other side of the wall are now our enemies. Why we have to go to war. It is easy to hear those voices, because they are all around us now. (2019)

Certainly, there are many zombie narratives that focus on what Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich calls “a small Hobbesian band of human survivors” (2018: 372), like, for instance, the ongoing TV series *The Walking Dead* (2010–). These survivors have to fight their way through a post-apocalyptic landscape filled with the living dead and, even more perilously, other such Hobbesian bands and their warlord-like leaders. That is,



these narratives dramatize the absence of Leviathan, of a sovereign able to institute a monopoly of violence in order to “pacify” and “civilize” social relations (see Elias 2000), offering its characters the chance to experience the ur-American fantasy of “*regeneration through violence*” in a late capitalist “savage war” (Slotkin 1998: 12; original emphasis). These narratives tacitly posit the state as a solution to the threat of social breakdown. In Whitehead and Romero, on the other hand, the state has not quite gone away, and ends up proposing a solution—if a hopeless one—that is certainly more part of the problem. That is to say, Whitehead and Romero suggest, quite like Neale, that the post-catastrophic Leviathan can only promise peace and stability to some at the cost of turning the life of others nasty, brutish, and short.

In *Zone One*, large parts of the United States (and the entire globe) have become effectively ungovernable, though there are camps in which survivors perform both military and civilian tasks: in the uneven and combined geography of the catastrophe, the provisional government is able to precariously assert its monopoly of violence in (peri-)urban regions, while there is a large “hinterland” in which social relations have more or less collapsed (cf. Neel 2018). The mood propagated by Buffalo is quite hopeful, though. While Mark Spitz once remembers the words of his father, who explained the term “apocalypse” to mean that “in the future, things will be even worse than they are now” (Whitehead 2011: 120), the narrator ironically characterizes the position of the provisional government with the following, decidedly anti-apocalyptic words:

Buffalo [...] was the exalted foundry of the future. The Nile, the Cradle of Reconstruction. All the best and brightest (and, most importantly, still breathing) had been flown up to Buffalo, where [...] they had to rewind catastrophe. [...]. If they could reboot Manhattan, why not the entire country? These were the contours of the new optimism. (35)

The catastrophe is perceived as a reversible process, as a mere “crisis” that “will pass, and be passed through, clearing out systemic dead wood along the way,” as Williams (2010: 4) puts it. In order to motivate survivors to help rebuilding the old world, a new set of terms and phrases is introduced that transforms the survivors, “half-mad refugees, a pathetic shit-flecked, traumatized herd” into representatives of the “American Phoenix,” risen from the ashes (79), thus subsuming their “individual struggles for survival” to a “larger narrative of transition” (Sorensen 2014: 565). From the perspective of the provisional government, then, the zombie apocalypse is reversible, a mere temporary apocalypse.

So far, the provisional government has only created a new language; the point, however, is to reestablish the material conditions of class society. Buffalo does not merely invent “buzzwords” (53) or a new “anthem” (110), but also distributes regulations—“No-No Cards”—to the sweepers that exhort them to respect the



“properties” they sweep, including a “broken window with the red circle and diagonal line across it” (12). Broken windows are, in fact, mentioned often enough in the novel for the reader to take notice, in a reference to the infamous broken-windows theory of policing which holds that cracking down on the slightest infractions would stop crime from spreading. The theory gained publicity and notoriety when it was used to explain the reduction of crime rates in New York City under then mayor Rudolph Giuliani, but Loïc Wacquant argues that it merely ended up exacerbating the “permanent police harassing of the poor in public space” (2009: 265). By way of this allusion, *Zone One* suggests that the sweeping⁷ of Downtown Manhattan is to be read as a gloss on ongoing processes of “gentrification”—a notion that Mark Spitz himself is reminded of (Whitehead 2011: 29)—displacing unwanted populations from urban centers. The sweepers themselves are, however, not convinced that they will be among the beneficiaries of this project of urban renewal.

Buffalo had not yet divulged who was going to get resettled in Manhattan once the sweepers were finished, but [Mark Spitz’s colleague] Gary had long been skeptical that he would be among them. “You think we’re going to end up here? We ain’t special. They’re going to put the rich people here. Politicians and pro athletes. Those chefs from those cooking shows. (72)

Regardless of the accuracy of Gary’s speculations about the composition of the upper class to come—or, more accurately, to return—the point he is trying to make is clear. Whatever the post-post-apocalyptic future will bring, it will also include class inequality—“survival” is, as Tim Lanzendörfer puts it, “synonymous with the survival of capitalism” (2018: 167). As Sven Cvek perceptively remarks, the sweepers make up “the labor force preparing the ground for future government and corporate investments, from which they will not in any way benefit” (2014: 10). Instead, insofar as both are “undesirable inhabitants of Zone One” (11), they share the zombies’ fate.

The reproduction of class relations requires a defense of capitalist social property relations; and, indeed, the regulations enforced by Buffalo hold that the principle of private property will have to be recognized even during the zombie apocalypse. Ultimately, the provisional government’s goal is economic recovery. What is to return “in the days to come” after the zombies’ defeat are “thriving industries, full of opportunities” (Whitehead 2011: 82). The military personnel hunting zombies in what appears at first to be an entirely lawless space is prohibited via “anti-looting regs” (38) from appropriating products that might be useful for them or their civilian compatriots

⁷ Mark Spitz’ occupational title—sweeper—metaphorically equates the unwanted population with dirt that needs to be removed, echoing former French Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy’s contemptuous announcement to clean the Paris suburb Clichy-sous-Bois “with a Kärcher” (quoted in Bernard 2007) during the 2005 riots. Replying to an interviewer who ventured that the sweepers made him think of “Giuliani sweeping the undesirables off the island,” Whitehead claims that this meaning “was probably in there,” despite not having been “intentional” (Naimon 2012).



in the camps—excepting commodities from “official sponsor” who are promised future “tax breaks” for supplying the Reconstruction effort (39). I have argued in the previous section that the zombies are best defined by the fact that their consumptive practices rely on the immediate appropriation of use-values (including human flesh). *Zone One* makes clear that being a human subject under a regime of capitalist social property relations is identical with being barred from having immediate access to the means of subsistence. The border between the human subject and its riotous antithesis is drawn by force, by the cops, those “active servant[s] of the commodity [...], whose job is to ensure that a given product of human labor remains a commodity, with the magical property of having to be paid for” (Debord 2006: 197). Once the narrator relates how “a den of bandits who had taken over one of the mega-drugstores” are quickly dispatched by the military (Whitehead 2011: 35). These bandits are literally guilty of the crime only allegorized by the figure of the zombies. Simply taking the things one might need to live—vulgo: looting—is prohibited. It does not matter too much whether it is living bandits or the living dead. Their position is structurally homologous; both get killed.

The world of *Zone One*, then, is in the throes of an unexplained and inexplicable catastrophe,⁸ that leaves vast stretches of humanity unable to acquire the means of subsistence in a legitimate manner, that is to say, through monetarily mediated exchange. The state, on the other hand, treats this catastrophe as a mere crisis and acts to resume business as usual as quickly as possible. All of those who stand in the way of the restoration—whether they are zombies or bandits—become the targets of violence exerted by the agents of the state and their deputies, remain barred from entering the spaces in which the remaining humans congregate through walls, and are mercilessly hunted down when trying to cross these borders. Sound familiar? Certainly, this would seem to be a fairly apt description of the current state of late capitalism where state violence against the dispossessed, particularly at the increasingly militarized borders of nation-states or supranational constructs, is endemic. In the novel, the desire to restore the status quo ante, however, ends in a colossal failure: the zombies cannot be stopped, and the last representatives of the provisional government must escape from New York, though it seems likely that they die trying. The zombie narrative, then, imagines the monsters as the “grave-diggers” of a society that hardly deserves to be called bourgeois in these final moments of its decline. Marx and Engels, who use this expression in a well-known passage, however, thought that this role was reserved for a working class united by the “advance of industry” (1994: 169)—or that is what they thought in 1848, anyway

⁸ The reason for the outbreak is left vague or a complete mystery in the best zombie narratives. In *The Night of the Living Dead*, scientists speculate whether radiation from the “Venus probe” had caused the dead to rise, thereby echoing the cluelessness of vulgar economists vis-à-vis capitalist crisis. William Jevons, for instance, suggested that the 1873 depression was a result of “some great and wide-spread meteorological influence recurring at like periods” like sun-spots (Jevons 1964; quoted in Mason 2016: 161).



(see, for instance, Marx's draft letters to Vera Zasulich in Shanin 1983: 98-126). But haven't we just concluded that the post-1968 zombie is not a worker?

Hungry Non-Workers, Unite?—or, Decomposing Bodies, Decomposing Class

Colson Whitehead's novels published before *Zone One* traced, sometimes only by way of allusion, sometimes explicitly as in *John Henry Days* (2001), a historical process in and through which the introduction of new technologies made both older machines and the human bearers of labor-power progressively obsolete. Thus, the political unconscious of his novels—whose setting ranges from the mid-nineteenth to the early twenty-first century—is informed by the intertwined processes the Endnotes collective describes as “technological ratcheting” and a “relatively declining demand for labour” (2015a: 127). With the figure of the zombie, *Zone One* has found a perfectly appropriate figure to articulate the (in)human consequences of what it means to be excluded from the sphere of wage labor, to become the target of violence exerted by state and non-state actors, and finally to spontaneously rise up against capitalism's necropolitical regime. In this section, I will draw on Brenner's crisis-theoretical account of the “long downturn,” the Endnotes collective's ensuing theses on the fate of the workers' movement, and Joshua Clover's discussion of the emergence of “riot prime” as a form of struggle of the surplus proletariat in order to show how the socio-political conjuncture articulated by the zombie is theorized in recent Marxian accounts of political economy, crisis, and revolution.

Brenner's theory of crisis rests on a sophisticated understanding of the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production he shares with other so-called Political Marxists like the late Ellen Meiksins Woods, who points out that

fundamentally, both capital and labour are utterly dependent on the market for the most basic conditions of their own reproduction. Just as workers depend on the market to sell their labour-power as a commodity, capitalists depend on it to buy labour-power, as well as the means of production, and to realize their profits by selling the goods or services produced by the workers. (2002: 97)

Moreover, Wood points out that the market's power to determine “social reproduction” requires it to have “penetrat[ed] into the production of life's most basic necessity: food” (ibid.); and the zombies' fate is, thus, to search for the conditions of their own reproduction outside of the market. Yet, the appropriators who manage production are also caught in a logic beyond their control. Due to the “coercive laws of competition” (Marx 1990: 433), they are forced to lower their costs to offer competitive prices. This compels them to constantly increase productivity by “introducing fixed capital embodying ever more efficient technology,” as Brenner (2006: xx) puts it. The Marxist historian has offered an influential account of the trajectory of the global capitalist



economy in the second half of the twentieth century, noting that global competition saw nations such as Germany and Japan achieve immense increases in productivity which challenged US economic hegemony. The ensuing “over-capacity and over-production” led to a decrease of manufacturing rates of profit as “world manufacturing prices had been unable to grow in line with wages and the cost of plant and equipment” (Brenner 2002: 18). With Keynesian measures not just failing to remedy the situation but actually exacerbating it (34), the long downturn is marked by a persistent failure of profitability to recover, which resulted in “rising unemployment” (Brenner 2006: 8) and a “low-wage economy,” in which “high levels of job insecurity and intensified competition for falling numbers of decent jobs” have “depressed wage aspirations” (254). This era of the long downturn, whose beginning Brenner dates to 1973, a “world-historical year” (Clover 2016: 9) coincidentally placed precisely between the respective releases of *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), is also the era of the late capitalist zombie.

Brenner’s *Economics of Global Turbulence* is primarily concerned with providing an adequate explanation for the fall of the profit rate. The Endnotes collective, which has published five issues of an eponymous journal since 2008, focuses more explicitly on the consequences of the long downturn for those whose reproduction depends on their ability to sell their labor-power for a wage, discerning a “crisis in the class relation” due to a relatively decreasing demand for labor (Endnotes 2010a). Following Brenner, they note the tendency of competition to force individual capitals to introduce labor-saving technologies in order to increase productivity and cut costs. Subsequently, workers are set free in certain lines, and an “industrial reserve army” (Marx’s term) emerges that, among other things, tends to exert a downward pressure on the wages of employed workers. In the past, new industries have often absorbed considerable numbers of workers thus set free—as well as those newly proletarianized and moving to the cities from the countryside, where they could no longer manage to reproduce themselves—initiating a new sequence of wage growth, technological innovation, and a slowdown of profitability (cf. Endnotes 2010b: 29). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, however, Endnotes argue that there is a “fall in the demand for labour in new lines as well as old,” and this is because “*labour-saving technologies tend to generalise, both within and across lines*” (31; original emphasis), especially since the microelectronic revolution. If this might come across as slightly technologically determinist, Endnotes contributor Aaron Benanav has more recently shown that it is not automation per se, but the fact that output growth rates have been smaller than the rate of productivity growth that is to blame for “higher spikes of unemployment and increasingly jobless recoveries” as well as “declining labour shares of income” (2019: 12). Drawing on Brenner, Benanav, thus, argues that it was “[t]he simultaneity of limited technological dynamism and worsening economic stagnation” that “combine[d] to generate a progressive decline in industrial employment levels” (21). Indeed, the process of capital



accumulation which includes the constraint to introduce labor-saving technological innovations and the ensuing tendency of the rate of profit to fall end up producing a relatively increasing number of human beings that become economically superfluous. These, in turn, are forced to pursue any work, regardless of how precarious, dangerous, informal, or illegal, while still being permanently threatened by pauperism.

While relying on Brenner, Endnotes also emphasize that the necessary emergence of such a surplus population was presciently detected by Marx. In the 25th chapter of *Capital*, vol. 1, Marx writes thus:

The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour-power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.* (1990: 798; original emphasis)

He goes on to add the methodological reminder that this law, “[l]ike all other laws,” can be “modified in its working by many circumstances,” which cannot be taken into account on the abstract level of presentation Marx is committed to in *Capital*. One example for such a circumstance is “the second World War, which, as a result, was [...] a gigantic operation to destroy not just capital but also redundant labor-power” (Freundinnen und Freunde der klassenlosen Gesellschaft 2015: 49; my translation), thereby reestablishing the conditions of profitable accumulation—if only for a while, for the span of Brenner’s “long boom” which preceded the long downturn. This brief age of growing prosperity in advanced capitalist nations, however, gave the impression that Marx’s expectation of expanding immiseration had been incorrect. Endnotes acknowledges as much, but point out that Marx will have been right in the long term.

[T]he catastrophe for which we wait is not something of the future, but is merely the continuation of the present along its execrable trend. [...]. In any case, for a huge chunk of the world’s population it has become impossible to deny the abundant evidence of the catastrophe. Any question of the absorption of this surplus humanity has been put to rest. It exists now only to be managed: segregated into prisons, marginalised in ghettos and camps, disciplined by the police, and annihilated by war. (Endnotes 2010b: 50-51)

The evidence is abundant, indeed; and the figure of the zombie has been anticipating the catastrophe in the realm of popular culture for the last half century.



The zombies, those living-dead gravediggers, thus, resemble a grotesque representation of “the lowest sediment of the relative surplus population” which “dwells in the sphere of pauperism,” the infamous “lumpenproletariat” (Marx 1990: 797; see also Carpenter 2019), more than the industrial working class, thus suggesting that the centrality of the latter in Marxist theory may have to be revised. Daniel Zamora notes that this is, in many ways, what has been happening since the late 1960s. Instead of looking at exploited workers, many left theorists focused on the excluded, who are deprived because of social classification schemes and discriminatory practices based on their identities. Like Endnotes, he insists on instead treating exploitation and exclusion as mutually mediated, arguing that they are “the common and contradictory product of a single social process (the accumulation of capital).” He, thus, concludes that “political and class organizations (e.g. unions)” need to be more attentive to “the socio-economic stakes represented by the ‘surplus population’” (Zamora 2013). Endnotes are, however, more skeptical about the potential of the workers’ movement and its institutions (e.g. unions). In a comprehensive account of “the rise and fall of the workers’ movement,” they suggest that the “communist horizon” toward which the western workers’ movement was oriented needs itself to be explained through materialist analysis (2015a: 81). They claim that the workers’ movement’s vision of the future rested on the assumption that the growth of industrialization would produce an ever-growing industrial working class that would be forged into a collective that transcended existing separations such as religion, nationality, or ethnicity through the shared experience of factory work:

The time of the workers’ movement was simply the time of the rise and decline of the semi-skilled male worker and of the industries where he worked. Together they made it possible to imagine that capital was tendentially unifying the class by means of an affirmable workers’ identity. (108)

In the long run, the unified working class was then believed to be able to seize control of the means of production. Yet, as discussed above, the history of capital accumulation in the twentieth century resulted in a relative decline of growth in industrial employment (126), which cast doubt on the validity of the movement’s horizon. The historical tendency no longer seems to lead to the universalization of the collective worker; the proletariat, instead, appears increasingly fragmented:

The working class—always internally differentiated—displays a diminishing capacity for unification under a single hegemonic figure, thus realizing its always latent tendency to decompose into fragments [...]. At the heart of this fractiousness is the division of the class into two parts: (1) a shrinking one that retains higher wages and social protections, but must constantly fight rearguard actions against capitalist “reforms” and restructurings; and (2) a growing one that faces poor prospects of employment and is offered few social protections. (Endnotes 2015b: 277)



This division is fictionalized in the dramatis personae of the zombie narrative, which pits human survivors, who still have something to lose (their life and limb), in a desperate fight to protect what liberal discourse would certainly have the audacity to call their “privileges” against the living dead. The zombies and their decomposing bodies are a synecdoche of the proletariat subject to class decomposition.

But who is meant to make the revolution, then? In *Riot. Strike. Riot* (2016), Joshua Clover offers some suggestions about the shape revolutionary struggles might assume in the current conjuncture.⁹ Rather than presupposing certain strategies and tactics that should be chosen because the workers’ movement employed them in the past, Clover proposes to take a look at socio-economic transformations that accompanied the long downturn, suggesting that “[p]eople struggle where they are” (144). If productivity growth, as per Benanav (2019), has outpaced output growth, leading to a relative decline in employment in manufacture, Clover argues that the strike, a form of struggle over the price of labor-power set in the sphere of production, loses its centrality. Instead, Clover regards riots as a type of “circulation struggle,” in which people fight over the price of market goods, resorting, among other practices, to “looting,” which is “a version of price-setting in the marketplace, albeit at price zero” (2016: 29). The struggles do not occur on the factory floor, but in the streets, in public spaces, relying on blockades, occupations, clashes with cops, the claiming of empty houses, and other tactics that are organized not so much around seizing the means of production, but take the form of “a tactic of social reproduction” (191). The looting that often accompanies riots is not a “manifestation of a consumerist desire,” as Slavoj Žižek (2011) put it, but constitutes an appropriation of use-values without the mediation of commodity exchange. Unlike workers on strike, who are meant to be united through their common position in the process of production and valorization, the riotous surplus proletarians share “no necessary kinship but their dispossession” (16). As such, they will not make the mistake, Clover hopes, of asking for the redistribution of wealth which would amount to mere crumbs from a pie whose slices have long been allotted to “the haves” and which is already moldy, anyway (172). Instead, “[t]he structurally excluded gather in the streets and the square, in the holding areas and outer rings of the gleaming, dying cities. [...]. *Riot prime* is not a demand but a civil war” (173; original emphasis). By now, of course, Clover’s often poetic evocation of the new surplus rebels will inevitably remind us of our favorite monsters, who also gather to wage an unrelenting attack on the vestiges of a doomed civilization. They have no demands that could be met by the existing order, and they care little for recognition. Either the defenders of that order manage to destroy them, or the order itself needs to give way.

⁹ For a concise summary of the “theoretical intervention” performed by the book, see the interview with Clover in this issue. In an article co-authored with Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich, I also discuss the post-1968 zombies’ consumption as an allegory for the practice of looting along Clover’s lines (Büscher-Ulbrich and Lieber 2021: 67-69).



Zombie Apocalypse Without Communist Kingdom

In fact, on the level of cultural representations is where Clover discovers the most apt figural crystallization of “bodies moved into circulation” (121), that is, in Gwendolyn Brooks’ 1969 poem “Riot,” which reacts to instances of rioting in Chicago in 1968. In the poem, an upper-middle-class white man is rushed by “the Poor” who “were coming toward him in rough ranks. *In seas*” (Brooks 1969; quoted in Clover 2016: 121; my emphasis). As the epigraphs to this chapter reveal, describing riotous masses as waves, floods, or torrents is an ancient tradition: Virgil’s Danäans, “[w]ilder than foaming floodwaters”; Heinrich Heine’s “dark flood of human beings”; as well as countless other examples that could be added to a list of violent insurrections with metaphorically aquatic characteristics leading up to communist geographer Phil Neel’s more recent proclamation of a “coming flood” in his superb *Hinterland* (2018: 168). And today’s zombies, too, figure more often than not as waves of bodies rushing against any makeshift barricades erected by human survivors, which is powerfully visualized in Marc Forster’s *World War Z* (2013), where thousands upon thousands of zombies rush toward walled-off Jerusalem in an unending wave that finally spills over, spelling doom for the city and its inhabitants. In *Zone One*, an “extended water metaphor” (Swanson 2014: 392) runs through the entire final chapter, in which the zombies figure as a “flood” (Whitehead 2011: 192) that charges the wall on Canal Street. When the latter finally collapses, the zombies “sloshed through [...] spread[ing] like hungry rivulets” (245), as a “maelstrom” (246), a “wave of the dead,” or even a “dark tsunami” (248). Whitehead’s novel thereby commits itself to an old representational strategy for which rebellious masses can only appear as indistinct, as if the crowd by definition negated the particularity of its elements, dissolving discrete subjects and fusing them together in a new, liquid mass subject, “de-individuated flaps of masticated flesh, rendered anonymous,” in Whitehead’s words—which is, of course, precisely how Gustave Le Bon (2002) defined the crowd. While the conservative author of *The Crowd* was horrified by this prospect of de-individuation, others are attracted to the “zombie horde” as a “swarm where no trace of the individual remains” (Lauro and Embry 2008: 89) for the very same reason. *Zone One*, without feeling the need to either celebrate or condemn the flood of the living dead, mobilizes the wave metaphor to provide a compelling symbol of proletarian insurrection in the long downturn.

But while it may well be possible, even obvious, to decipher the zombies as a representation, reflection, expression, or symptom of a political-economic transformation that is analyzed by Brenner, Endnotes, Clover, or others, this will with some justification raise the concern that one could simply stick to reading these Marxist authors. In this final section I, thus, want to suggest that the form of zombie narratives can offer a heuristic through which to perceive theoretical interventions. The fictional monsters appear as a force of nature that cannot possibly be integrated into human



society. The human survivors, on the other hand, need to destroy them by all means necessary. The zombie, the human; between them “[n]o conciliation is possible,” as Frantz Fanon put it when speaking of colonizer and colonized, “of the two terms, one is superfluous” (2001: 30).¹⁰ This has both thematic and narratological reasons. As the zombies cannot be stopped by the unforced force of the better argument, the human survivors have no choice but to destroy the monsters lest they want to perish. Simultaneously, the form of the zombie narrative, too, requires the neutralization of the living dead, who are, as Carl Swanson suggests, “contagious antisubjects,” which “not only kill characters,” thus removing them from the diegetic world, but also “produce more anticharacters” (2014: 385) which threaten narrative as such:

Left unchecked, the zombie contagion would depopulate the narrative of agential subjects (characters) and replace them with the generic trope of diegetic walking corpses (anticharacters), among whom no narrative could be maintained. The formal drama of a zombie narrative is thus provided by the self-destructive instability of its central premise—the zombie menaces the constitutive characters of a narrative and therefore the narrative itself. (385-86)

¹⁰ This gloss on Fanon is, finally, the time to acknowledge that attention to mechanisms and histories of racialization has been absent from this paper. Actually existing relative surplus populations assume various forms of appearance (see footnote 6 above), of which racialized Blackness is of particularly import (see Chen 2013); even though the origins of racialized domination predate the assertion of capital’s global domination and the ongoing expulsion of labor from the sphere of production, a historical materialist account of it has to look at how processes of racialized abjection are mediated by (Endnotes 2015b: 297; Schmitt-Egner 1976: 375) or articulated with (Hall 2019) the history of capital accumulation. From another theoretical vantage point, however, the zombies initially seem to neatly allegorize the condition of social death that marks the “ontological status” of Blacks in modernity as Frank Wilderson (2010: 14) and other Afro-pessimists proclaim. A key constituent element of this social death is, as Wilderson argues, “gratuitous violence, which means that the body of the slave is open to the violence of all others [...]. This vulnerability is not contingent upon his or her transgressing some type of law” (2017: 18). The same goes for the zombie: human characters cannot wait until the zombie has attacked a fellow survivor, but need to destroy the zombies regardless of any transgression, as their relationship is antagonistic, that is, “an irreconcilable struggle between entities [...] the resolution of which [...] entails the obliteration of one of the positions” (2010: 5). In the face of pervasive anti-Blackness, Wilderson calls for “real violence” to be “coupled with representational ‘monstrosity’ (66) to bring about “the end of the world” (120), and it is easy to see how zombie narratives may be read as entertaining this fantasy. Much more could be said about this, but let me just note that, on the diegetic level, Whitehead makes sure to note that “[a]ll the misery of the world” is among the undead: “[e]very race, color, and creed was represented” (2011: 243; for readings of *Zone One* that pay close attention to the novel’s articulation of race, see Hurley 2015 and Lanzendörfer 2018). Moreover, regardless of the composition of Whitehead’s horde in particular, there is a formal limit to the analogy: while Afro-pessimist theory acknowledges that it is possible for “nonblacks” to experience all kinds of violent domination, they do not thereby become Black, and it is only the latter group that is “paradigmatically” positioned through the operation of slave law (Sexton 2010: 36). This distinction does not hold in the case of the zombie narrative; a nonblack character who is bitten really does turn into a zombie. (Note that this is, in itself, not an argument against Afro-pessimism, but merely against a hypothetical Afro-pessimist reading of the zombie.) Just as, according to Marx, “[i]t is already contained in the concept of the *free labourer*, that he is a *pauper*: virtual pauper” (1993: 604; original emphases), all human characters in zombie narratives must fear to be bitten; they are always already virtual zombies. Hence, rather than engaging in “political ontology” (Wilderson 2010: 55), I concur with Joshua Clover that the “political economy of social death” (see the interview with Clover in this issue) is what needs to be analyzed.



This provides the zombie genre with its basic plot structure which revolves around the formal device of the “barricade” (386) behind which the survivors retreat to stave off the anti-narrative threat. A further implication of this antagonistic positioning of survivors and zombies, of narrative-sustaining characters and narrative-destroying anticharacters, is that it appears formally impossible to narrate the zombies’ eventual victory. The threat can be contained, as in the film adaptation of *World War Z*, where it is “the global action of U.S.-led military/humanitarian intervention” personified by Brad Pitt (Fehrle 2016: 529) that saves the world in anticipation of what Mann and Wainwright (2018) have called “climate leviathan”; or the narrative ends without proper closure, as in most installments of Romero’s “Living Dead” series. The first option corresponds to the structure of the classical monster narrative, in which “the anxiety that the future will be monstrous” is aroused only to eventually be placated when the “broken equilibrium” is restored (Moretti 1982: 68). Zombie narratives that awaken the desire for such a restoration and make their readers or audience root for the survivors betray, however, the revolutionary desire articulated by the zombies, those desperate proletarian monsters, and quickly degenerate into “paranoiac right-wing fantasies of civil unrest, vigilante justice, and impending race war” (Büscher-Ulbrich 2018: 387). If the violent suppression of the coming insurrections is not to be affirmed, solidarity with the monsters is called for.

And yet, while the absence of narrative closure that distinguishes the most interesting zombie stories suggests that a radical destabilization of capitalist civilization is possible, the genre is limited by the impossibility to reveal anything about social relations in the post-revolutionary community. A free association of the undead, a zombies’ commune remain unrepresentable. Pace Fredric Jameson, these narratives are well capable of imagining the end of capitalism—*fin du monde, fin du capitalisme, même chose*—but they fail at imagining a happy ending: communism. This seeming impossibility to conceive how to move from a negation of the world to the production and reproduction of a new one also characterizes much of today’s most ambitious revolutionary communist theory—ambitious, precisely because it refuses to seek consolation in the solutions attempted with various degrees of success in previous revolutionary situations. Facing capital as a “self-reproducing totality,” whose moments are all interrelated, it seems hard, almost “*unthinkable*” to think its destruction except in “the abstract, mystical form of a pure, indeterminate rupture,” as Endnotes write (2019: 119, 121; original emphasis). This easily leads to “fantasies of the Great Riot at the End of Time; of the primitivist hope for an apocalypse that sweeps the Earth clean” (135). The form of the zombie narrative is, again, best read as a symptomatic expression of this impasse in the realm of popular culture.

This dilemma haunting revolutionary theory which is approached through the lens of systematic dialectics by Endnotes has also been engaged by Bini Adamczak by way of



an analysis of the experience of failure in the post-revolutionary Soviet Union. If everything is supposed to be different after the revolution, it is impossible to imagine how the “world of tomorrow” could be “inhabited” by the “humans of today” (2017: 49; my translations). In fact, the zombie narrative offers one kind of solution to this contradiction, but merely the imaginary one of an ontological transformation from humans to zombies which replace the inadequate “human material” (Luxemburg 2004: 347; quoted in Adamczak 2017: 53). The corruption of post-revolutionary society is, thus, ruled out, but this comes at the price of being unable to predicate anything concrete of it. The desire for revolution would, then, be “suicidal” (Adamczak 2017: 52; my translation), and, indeed, *Zone One* ends with Mark Spitz apparently choosing death, which now begins to appear as the only form the revolutionary commitment to ending capitalism can take within the generic structures of the zombie genre (cf. Lanzendörfer 2018: 174). The zombies, those relentless proletarian monsters, articulate moments of a comprehensive crisis that may well turn into a catastrophe for capital; yet, the narrative form that employs them must fail to envision how a new world could be built from the ashes of the old.

In the end, the zombie narrative revolves around what Günther Anders (2019) once called an “apocalypse without kingdom,” that is, an “apocalypse that consists of mere downfall, which does not represent the opening of a new, positive state of affairs”; the zombies are “revolutionaries without a revolution” (Endnotes 2020: 18). While the historicization of the shifting shapes of the zombie alongside the “arc of accumulation” (Clover 2016: 134) exposes why it is such a great emblem of an age of immiseration and class decomposition, an earlier novel found a pithy expression for the limits of thinking the revolution qua apocalypse. In *Man’s Hope*, André Malraux’s 1937 account of the Spanish Civil War, a character laments that “[t]he apocalyptic mood clamours for everything right away,” which would lead to “certain defeat.” The “humble task” is, instead, “to *organize* the apocalypse” (1938: 118; original emphasis). Let me suggest, finally, that the zombie apocalypse might yet possess a weak revelatory power, after all, that may indicate just what needs to be organized in a post-revolutionary situation. I have argued above that there is something fundamentally human about the zombies—whatever else they are, they are primarily very hungry, but incapable of meeting their needs in a legitimate manner. This suggests, if only *ex negativo*, that what their immiseration and rage demand is the provision of food, which is, coincidentally, also what several Endnotes writers and contributors have focused on in recent pieces (Bernes 2018; Clegg and Lucas 2020). Adopting Adorno’s “coarsest demand: that no-one shall go hungry any more” (2005: 156), Clegg and Lucas write that “[t]he task is clear enough”: ensuring that no one will go hungry “will require establishing a material human community on the ruins of capital” (2020: 108). The zombie narrative can only imagine an inhuman community in the wake of capital’s demise; our humble task, perhaps, is to organize the end of the world so as to—finally—humanize it.



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