TOWARDS THE END OF CIVILIZATION AND BACK:
NEOLIBERALISM AS FORM IN COLSON WHITEHEAD’S
ZONE ONE

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ABSTRACT: This article intends to present an investigation about the neoliberal matrix as a structuring element in the construction of the apocalypse narrative in Zone one (2011), by Colson Whitehead. Throughout the literary work, the reader follows the experience of a group of characters living in a post-civilization world in which the catastrophe came about through a virus that changes into living-dead those whom it infects. Our guiding objective is to propose a reading that ultimately shows a mirroring process between the idea of the end of civilization and civilization itself as understood in the molds of neoliberal practices.

Keywords: Apocalypse. Neoliberalism. Zone One. Civilization.
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RUMO AO FIM DA CIVILIZAÇÃO E DE VOLTA:
NEOLIBERALISMO COMO FORMA EM ZONE ONE,
DE COLSON WHITEHEAD

RESUMO: Este artigo pretende apresentar uma investigação sobre a matriz neoliberal como elemento estruturante na construção da narrativa de apocalipse em Zone One (2011), de Colson Whitehead. Ao longo da obra literária, o leitor acompanha a experiência de um grupo de personagens que vivem em um mundo pós-civilização em que a catástrofe surgiu por meio de um vírus que transforma em mortos-vivos aqueles que infecta. Nosso objetivo norteador é propor uma leitura que, em última instância, mostre um processo de espelhamento entre a ideia do fim da civilização e a própria civilização entendida nos moldes das práticas neoliberais.


INTRODUCTION

This article intends to present an investigation about the neoliberal matrix as a structuring element in the construction of the apocalypse narrative in Zone One (2011), by Colson Whitehead. Throughout the literary work, the reader follows the experience of a group of characters living in a post-civilization world in which the catastrophe came about through a virus that changes into living-dead those whom it infects.

The mirroring we seek to propose here takes place between the constitution of this post-civilization world and the neoliberal policies of nowadays, so that we can assess how current neoliberalism is already, in fact, a kind of end of civilization. Zone One’s narrative, moving between the apocalyptic present lived by the protagonist and his recollections of the pre-catastrophe world, performs a mimetic exercise that makes it possible to identify marks of the contemporary real world – that is, the globalized, industrialized world, where practices of consumerism and individualism fostered by world
capitalism prevail – as indiscernible from the ways of organizing life experiences of post-disaster subjects. The paradox is not unjustified here: talking about the post-civilization world and at the same time claiming that this world is a kind of continuity of civilization itself is useful, in fact, as it allows for a revaluation of the idea of civilization as we understand it nowadays and the way it is being built.

Therefore, talking about the end of the world is also asking which world we consider as an ideal and/or indispensable world and what practices, both individual and collective, we carry out that go against this judgment. In other words, to inquire about how, nowadays, the value we attribute to the notion of civilization is undermined by the very way in which we constitute ourselves collectively.

With this purpose, we will seek to review in the first topic some notions related to the idea of neoliberalism, so that we can assess the hard core of the concepts of subject and society as we currently perceive them. This means that we will point out neoliberalism and the practices that underlie and support it as essential ones for understanding the idea of civilization.

Then, we present a reading and interpretation of Zone one that turns its attention to the textual markers of the apocalypse narratives, seeking to highlight how this constitution of a post-disaster world, in which characters struggle for survival and restoration, points to a continuity between the notions of civilization and apocalypse. Pervaded by values such as efficiency, standardization, productivity, and management, the relationship between characters, and between these and the environment in which they find themselves, demands for a careful look that would be able to point out the elements responsible for the continuity postulated here.

NEOLIBERAL ASSUMPTIONS

Neoliberalism is a revitalization of the constituent structures of capitalism. David Harvey (2005) reminds us, in the introduction to his book, on the subject that the turning point capable of renewing capitalism and giving it a new philosophy on a global scale took place between 1970 and 1980 with the elections of three government leaders in different countries: in China, Deng Xiaoping takes the first steps towards the liberalization of the economy that would end up showing uninterrupted growth rates of 20% a year; in England, Margaret Thatcher is elected with the mission of restricting the power of the unions and bringing to an end a destructive inflationary stagnation; and, finally, Ronald Reagan in the United States, pushing the country to a “restriction of
labor power” in addition to “deregulating industry, agriculture and extractive sectors” (HARVEY, 2005, p. 3).

In addition to a detailed definition of neoliberal practices and their means and ends, the most lucid way to apprehend their extent is a quick empirical observation of how, as subjects, we organize ourselves in society: our priorities, desires and, finally, our possibilities. Neoliberalism is the enclosure that dictates the nature and degree of each of these categories. Harvey (2005) quite accurately points out that: “The process of neo-liberalization, however, involved a lot of ‘creative destruction’ not only of the old powers and institutional structures, but also of the divisions of labor, personal relationships, the promotion of welfare state, ways of life and thinking”, in addition to “forms of connection to the land and habits of the heart”, therefore “It [neoliberalism] maintains that the social good is maximized if reach and frequency are maximized market transactions, seeking to frame all human actions in the market domain” (HARVEY, 2005, p. 3).

From this perspective, in practical terms, the best definition of neoliberalism is found in ourselves, since we are already in essence the products and cause of this process. This inseparability is referenced by Springer (2016) in an academically unorthodox way, though one might say it has its reasons for being so:

Fuck the hold that it has on our political imaginations. Fuck the violence it engenders. Fuck the inequality it extols as a virtue. Fuck the way it has ravaged the environment. Fuck the endless cycle of accumulation and the cult of growth. Fuck the Mont Pelerin society and all the think tanks that continue to prop it up and promote it. Fuck Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman for saddling us with their ideas. Fuck the Thatchers, the Reagans, and all the cowardly, self-interested politicians who seek only to scratch the back of avarice. Fuck the fear-mongering exclusion that sees ‘others’ as worthy of cleaning our toilets and mopping our floors, but not as members of our communities. Fuck the ever-intensifying move towards metrics and the failure to appreciate that not everything that counts can be counted. Fuck the desire for profit over the needs of community. Fuck absolutely everything neoliberalism stands for, and fuck the Trojan horse that it rode in on! For far too long we’ve been told that ‘there is no alternative’, that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’, that we live in a Darwinian nightmare world of all against all ‘survival of the fittest’. (SPRINGER, 2016, p. 288)

Violence, inequity, environmental destruction, endless accumulation, cult of economic growth, horror at the other, the obsessive need to measure all spheres of life by reducing them to data, and the prevalence of profit over
Community needs are the defining features, according to the author, of a neoliberal society. Therefore, it is clear that if one speaks of subject, or individual, it must be taken into account that little or no space for self-determination can arise from a life in community that is mainly dictated by interests that are beyond its scope or genesis. In this perspective, we want to emphasize the fact that the forms of life are not only pre-conceived and with a tendency to standardization at universal levels, generating both an incessant search for entering that sphere that is perceived as a successful life, but also that individuals and subjects, as such, do not seem to exist. And this, as the author of the aforementioned passage puts it, in favor of the maintenance of a superstructure that privileges some and condemns countless contingents of the world population to misery and exclusion. Thus, individuals in this social model must face the systematization of economic practices with very pernicious ends, but which continue to achieve success by presenting themselves as the only viable way of existence.

In a complementary understanding, which starts from another perspective about the term subject, Han (2017) draws attention to the fact that this category is intertwined with a notion of subjection. In this argumentative line, one of the visible marks of the functioning of capitalist logic is subjection through neoliberal psychopolitics: “consumer capitalism enlists emotions in order to generate more desire and needs” (Han, 2017, p. 39). Our desires are also already prefabricated according to the guidelines of the international market, resulting in a kind of ulterior level of determination on the part of the subjects.

No doubt remains regarding this current configuration of what we normally refer to as capitalism. As its late development, neoliberalism is the state of the art of the process of accumulation and regulation of subjectivities for the maintenance and perpetuation of itself. Indeed, one could argue in favor of an express way in which individuals are seen as participatory beings and endowed with voices capable of significant changes that may affect this dynamic; however, this argument holds only if we take the representative constitution of the Western liberal democracies as paradigmatic, but in so doing we face new problems.

In this regard, it is always worth remembering, following Lazzarato (2012), that the very way of governing and managing human resources in general is also already permeated by a kind of psyche that is always previously stimulated by neoliberal practices. In other words: in contemporary capitalism, governments rule over social machines and the subjectivities compatible with them. In this sense, the possibility of agency of individuals, when referenced to disruptive processes, will always bypass the constituted forms of governance,
and regulated, institutionalized, collective expressions, as these are already imbricated with neoliberal control strategies.

From this viewpoint, one can lean towards the conclusion that the maximum efficiency in favor of maximizing the accumulation has as objective, in the individual sphere, the constant repositioning of the individuals following the logics of an ascending vector; in the social sphere, it means optimizing the conditions for perpetuating this process at the expense of a continuous emptying of these subjectivities as potential threats. In both cases, we seem to dive into the perspective that there is a company being managed. Even if we turn to the idea of the State as a maintainer of basic guarantees for individuals, it is not possible to escape the trap of the structure being managed: “the State continues to play an important role in the production of subjectivity, but its governance is from now on privatized since it is the administration of the company that imposes itself as a management method” (LAZZARATO, 2012, p. 169).

At this point, a potentialized preparation of the founding myth of neoliberalism that claims that there are no societies, only individuals, comes into play. This maxim not only relieves the state from its obligation of working towards the construction of a society guided by the common good, but it also implies the implosion of the very values that are essential to the coexistence of these individuals: we are facing the “entrepreneurs of themselves”. Wendy Brown (2015) shapes this idea in the following terms:

[...] both persons and states are construed on the model of the contemporary firm, both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value, and both persons and states do so through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors. (BROWN, 2015, p. 22)

It is necessary to extract from this, in conjunction with the previous contributions, an essence of such individual. It is perceptible at first sight that neoliberalism is camouflaged through ideas of freedom and autonomy and creates the illusion that individuals are managers of themselves, precisely through the destruction of the foundations capable of guaranteeing the effective promotion and consequent implementation of this way of life. As a veiled subversion of these values, since the late 1970s there has been an undermining of any idea of civilization as a cohesive grouping of distinct societies engaged in the construction of an experience focused on the common, sharing, strengthening ties of solidarity and any other feelings of similar nature. In fact, when one considers that the very idea of civilization is anchored on such foundations, we face as corollary the prospect that neoliberalism is the driving force of mitigation and decline of this very civilization.
With these terms, and through these preliminary approaches, we make use of this approximation between civilizational collapse and the notion of apocalypse from the work of Colson Whitehead, since living in the end of times, on the other hand, gives us a kind of privileged position regarding the thinking about the end. As Engélibert (2019) postulates: “to put yourself at the end of times is a way of thinking the times of the end” (ENGÉLIBERT, 2019, p. 13, our translation). In the following topic, we seek to adduce from the literary narrative how these assumptions are reinvented, or rather, how their incessant reinvention attests to the rooting of their founding practices and how the figures of stragglers and skels (Zone one’s undead) and also of survivors are faces of the continuity postulated here between apocalypse and civilization in an advanced state of neoliberalization.

ZONE ONE: CONTINUITIES BETWEEN CIVILIZATION AND APOCALYPSE

Initially, it is necessary to consider the apocalyptic constitution of the world in Zone one, but mainly what this constitution communicates beyond, or through, its appearance. On the surface, that is, in Whitehead's creative choices concerning the characterization of this world, the reader is continually led to inquire about a kind of mirroring that takes place between the contemporary Western status quo and the desolate, apocalyptic space in which the narrative unfolds.

One of the techniques Whitehead uses is a broken use of time: the apocalyptic present is experienced and at every moment the given reality leads the one who witnesses it, especially Mark Spitz, the protagonist, to a recollection of the past life: “He’d been taking prep classes when the curtain fell and hadn’t worried about getting somewhere, or graduating or getting some brand of job afterward” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 12). Theses reminiscences of past things invade the reflections of everyday life in the apocalyptic moment, leading the reader through the configuration of the previous world and offering a perspective on how things were led to an end.

Mark is one of the members in a group of sweepers whose missions are to raid buildings in search of useful paraphernalia such as tools, clothes, drugs, food, etc. But their mission also consists in eliminating the so-called “undead”, finishing the process initiated by the virus that turned them into creatures. And after killing them they oversee the mounting of the bodies so that

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1 “se placer à la fin des temps, c’est une manière de penser les temps de la fin” (in the “original”).

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other teams, responsible for picking them up, can come and finish the job of clearing a given area of the city.

All the work is regulated by a central command said to be stated in the city of Buffalo. The orders are distributed according to the needs of the general reconstruction plan. Therefore, the activity resembles a military logic which can be inferred by the ranks through which many of the characters are referred to. Their main mission, besides reconstruction, is, of course, surviving. Although the cause of the disease is not mentioned as having been discovered, it is known by the dynamics of their approach to the living dead that the virus depends on physical contact to infect humans.

In this regard, their concern is to get rid of the undead that in the book are classified into different categories: the skels and the stragglers. The first are the active, moving type that attack people when they sense movement, the classic kind of zombie we witness in pop culture; the latter are the passive, mere monsters hanging around with no sense of purpose, and no trace of violent instincts. So, through the narrative we follow Mark Spitz as he seems to adapt and reason over this new condition of the world, an while doing this he rememorates his previous life, as a teenager, and later as a functional adult in a capitalist society.

It goes without saying that we do not advocate here for a narrative innovation that is contained only in the use of memories to broaden the vision of the whole, relative to the character’s psyche, but rather that, in the novel, such a technique is configured as an artifice with a well-established purpose, given that it is accentuated as it is repeated, embodying a kind of continuity between moments. This logic can be apprehended from several instances: from Mark Spitz’s pre-disaster professional ambitions compared to his way of dealing with (and perceiving) the work or position he occupies during the apocalypse, to descriptions of cities and ways of life of those who inhabit it, as well as the organizational logic that rules the larger structure responsible for managing the resources, both human and inanimate, that remain and that must be, above all, always optimized.

The feeling of estrangement is not unjustified. As a novel of its time, one of Zone one’s achievements is the representation via apocalyptic characterization of the pillars of Western civilization as we understand it today: “It happened every so often that he recognized something in these monsters, they looked like someone he had known or loved” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 18). And this leads us to a deepening of the issue of verisimilitude in the work: Whitehead’s writing is faithful to its parameters, coherent in what concerns the creation of the world devastated by a kind of plague that gives rise to hordes of half-living beings or half-dead, the undead, and with all of this the author is able to point to this
modern configuration of our experiences that is largely based on practices which have their origins in neoliberalism.

Further consideration is required in this point: the one whom we do not hesitate to classify as the protagonist, Mark Spitz, seems to repeatedly refuse this role; in face of himself, and of those who occupy his surroundings, there seems to be no margin for such a classification. Here, of course, we intertwine a category of literary analysis with a noun that is very present in the grammar of the modern individual and which allows us to rescue the motto of those times given by one of the forerunners of the modus operandi of neoliberal practices, Margaret Thatcher. The maxim that became paradigmatic that there would be no such thing as a society, but only individuals. Understood from his position in the narrative, therefore, our protagonist gives rise to questions about: 1) the scope of action of individuals in this society, 2) their general anxieties and 3) what kind of self-perception arises from this. What these questions have in common is the convergent field from which they originate, and which set their limits: neoliberal practices. The reference to neoliberal practices here is more about their effects on individuals and on the conduct of their existence than practices materialized in formal meetings of large companies, or in any frame of the stock exchange on a busy day, though.

Let us then point to these distinctive features of post-apocalyptic narratives that are inviting in relation to the thesis of a duplicated representation. No doubt, the contemporary reader has already the first of them well fixed in his imagination: survival. This instinct, which becomes an uninterrupted struggle, generally dictates the conduct of individuals and their social organization. Beyond the agonistic representation of the dirty and deteriorated bodies of the survivors of disasters, the underlying theme is a scarcity of nutritional resources that occasionally leads to the abandonment of well-defined parameters regarding the ethics of relationships between the individuals.

In the specific case of Zone one, this point is diversified: on the one hand, it is possible to witness the population converted into invalids, the ululating social body that reappears all the time on the streets or avenues, in the buildings, and in the houses, which seeks to satisfy its appetite devouring healthy humans; they are therefore the infected that become an inexorable threat and that must be systematically eradicated: "All over the world this was happening: the group of them hears food at the same time and they twist their bodies in unison, that dumb choreography" (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 22); on the other hand, where the issue of access to resources should be more pacified, we have a corps of amateur military personnel that performed different jobs in their respective past lives and who obtain their food from an entirely productivist logic: Mark Spitz and his colleagues must enter buildings and other
constructions and comply with a kind of pre-defined and elaborated schedule according to a system controlled by higher authorities. *Speed* and *efficiency* define the *ethos* of this action, which results in nothing more than a kind of cleansing, but above all, it is the means by which those in charge of these apocalyptic errands can see a progression in hierarchical terms.

Meritocratic paranoia underlies the idea of survival. This atmosphere can be perceived in one of the many scenes in which teams of scavengers have to search for provisions in the abandoned buildings throughout the city. Gary, in this sense, holds a kind of opposite awareness in relation to Mark concerning the overall catastrophe, analyzing and classifying people and events that he observes in terms of capacity. Survival, in his mind, seems to be just another practical errand, as one can infer from the following description: “Despite their friendship, the mechanic was not reluctant to share his bafflement that Mark Spitz hadn’t been cut down that first week, when the great hordes of unadaptables had been exterminated or infected, too ill-equipped to deal with the realignment of the universe” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 26), the population is likely to be classified between *fit* and *unfit*, as if the non-survivors did not have enough qualities to proceed; the tone of the passage is more derogatory than simply a statement: it is not a vague allusion to evolutionary theory based on the notion of Darwin’s “survival of the fittest”, but an evaluative consideration on whether they deserve or not continuing, and those who have not succeeded have their failure linked to the idea of incapability and/or inefficiency. It is the logic of the company, of individual self-management, which is being refined here.

That is why we think here of apocalypse through the idea of duplication: there seems to be no divergence between our constituted modes of existence and those that originate after the key event that triggers disorder. In fact, the disorder itself is only temporary, as a kind of crisis to be overcome. While witnessing, during one of his missions on the streets, an old man being attacked by a horde of undead, the idea of transitory situation crosses Mark’s mind; transitory in terms of a situation waiting for external control mainly thought of as belonging to an imaginary government. Mark’s perspective denotes a kind of hope and trust in an old order that is no more: “The phones were dead, all the stalwart and dependable networks had ceased to be, but maybe the authorities were fixing things out there, Mark Spitz remembered thinking, the government was getting control” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 21). This is, in fact, the conception of apocalypse that we can extract from the novel: not the end of everything, but the temporary end that opens to a new beginning; and *restarting* in this case does not configure a general restructuring and consequent abandonment of these ways of life which we are familiarized with, but rather their recovery, their
urgent rescue, which seems to attest at the same time our dependence and inability to organize and subsist beyond the already constituted ways of life.

Despite not being a work of fiction receptive to the term transitional fiction – once we are thrown into the narrative we already see an ongoing apocalypse – *Zone one*, and the way in which the idea of crisis, permanent and unaltered, appears in its pages, reminds us of some similarities with Frank Kermode’s formulations about apocalypses: “the fiction of transition is our way of registering the conviction that the end is immanent, rather than imminent” (KERMODE, 2000, p.100). Crisis is the natural state, not an expectation to be confirmed by some event. It is always in the process of being managed, not resolved. This was how it was in Mark Spitz’s past world, as it is in his apocalyptic present, which reinforces the idea of an organization of catastrophe, which in turn strengthens the link between a continuity or an indistinction between civilization (neoliberal) and apocalypse itself.

That’s how Spitz asks, in a self-reflective tone, about a special government team visiting Manhattan. Through the novel the reader is presented to this hierarchy of self-proclaimed authorities, mainly coming from different government posts pre-collapse or the military. They oversee the supervision and functioning of the camps, presenting demands to the lower ranks aiming to achieve order and regain the terrain now infested by the turned humans. Again, Mark witnesses this ongoing movement of authorities through the lenses of hope in terms of getting back the “old days” always thinking of these past days in terms of normality: “Why else were they in Manhattan but to transport the old ways across the violent passage of the calamity to the safety of the other side?” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 45). Here the old ways and the other side are actually symmetrical, one and the same thing. The old ways, of social organization, of resource distribution, of domination over space, of power relations, set the tone of urgency with which the “apocalypse” is treated, and this, therefore, we emphasize, does not really mean the end, but one end, that of civilization validated as the only possible one.

It can also be said that this perception is preceded, or better, founded on a series of everyday perceptions that shape this individual and that perhaps constitute the hard core of what Herbert Marcuse (2007) classifies as "one-dimensional man" and that nowadays would be better translated as “the indebted man”, according to Lazzarato (2012). The following excerpt is representative in this sense:

The dead had paid their mortgages on time, and placed the well-promoted breakfast cereals on the table when the offspring leaped out of bed in their fire-resistant jammies. The dead had graduated with admirable GPAs, configured monthly contributions to worthy causes, judiciously apportioned their 401(k)s
across diverse sectors according to the wisdom of their dead licensed financial
advisers, and superimposed the borders of the good school districts on mental
maps of their neighborhoods, which were often included on the long list when
magazines ranked cities with the Best Quality of Life. (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 26)

An ironic writing is grasped through the passage, since practices such as: payment of rent, sharing meals, donations to charitable causes, interaction
within the neighborhood, always with well-set boundaries, are all performative
of the average contemporary subject almost reduced to mediocrity, but which
are listed here from a glimpse of the half-dead beings that roam the city. The
way these subjects live, or lived in their previous lives, therefore, signals in fact
to a very reduced sphere in terms of the possibility of action, so that the author
reiterates the determinant the dead in the course of the description as if to tell
us that the judgment capable of distinguishing the living from the dead did not
reside firsthand in the biological factor, but rather had to be verified in the ways
of life.

It is convenient to assume that the apocalypse caused by the virus here
represents an enhancement of circumstances, so we return to the thesis of
continuity between the pre-collapse world and the post-apocalypse world. The
civilized world achieved this status for specific reasons, including the way in
which it disposed of individuals and linked them to their respective functions.
The word function is quite enlightening as it denotes progressive movement,
functioning with a delimited purpose, in addition to referring to a nature defined
by the constancy of actions. Routine, predictability, results. This combination
entangles Mark Spitz in both lives: pre and post catastrophe.

Let us look at a description of his job in the days where the supposed
normality reigned: “His job hadn’t been unduly bothersome; He worked in
Customer Relationship Management, New Media Department, of a coffee
multinational. A college buddy tipped him to it: “You’ll be perfect. It doesn’t
require any skills” (p. 129), Whitehead crafts a combination of proportions that
borders on the ridiculous: the diminutive specificity of Mark’s position contrasts
with the idea of a multinational; also, the double negative that occurs between
hadn’t been and unduly bothersome makes it difficult, on purpose, attributing
some personal value or a more important distinguishing mark to the work,
leading towards the belief that the position can in fact be filled by any individual.
The proportions widen as we elevate this scenery to a planetary level: there you
have the background image of world capitalism and its working modes.

However, despite the harmless and apparently meaningless repetition,
that is: not directed to any objective, purpose, or greater goal, individuals do not
escape unscathed from its effects. Contrary to what would be feasible to
suppose, what stands out from this mode of civilized organization are not
feelings of personal satisfaction, fullness of life, or a supposed normality, but rather a progressive illness of individuals. And Whitehead’s post-apocalyptic world elaborates in detail the meanings of this illness.

As the narrative progresses, we see that many of the people inhabiting the camps, especially the ones in charge of the raids on the streets, the teams responsible for searching things, or clean determined areas, that is, the employees of the newly structured unofficial power running the camps and the cities, must deal with mental breakdowns that could lead to diseases with a wide range of symptoms. Most of those symptoms, of course, are well known symptoms related to work and exhaustion in our civilized world, which points to a persistence of the organizational logic before and after the apocalyptic scenario. Pamphlets containing instructions on diets, working orders, and reconstruction initiatives are distributed all over the camps, (Zone one included), and on those pamphlets is also possible to find descriptions of symptoms concerning the overall condition of people not infected by the virus, whose main concern is surviving:

According to the specialists, symptoms included feelings of sadness or unhappiness; irritability or frustration, even over small matters; loss of interest or pleasure in normal activities; reduced sex drive; insomnia or excessive sleeping; changes in appetite leading to weight loss, or increased cravings for food and weight gain; reliving traumatic events through hallucinations or flashbacks; agitation or restlessness; being “jumpy” or easily startled; slowed thinking, speaking, or body movements; indecisiveness, distractibility, and decreased concentration; fatigue, tiredness, and loss of energy so that even small tasks seem to require a lot of effort; feelings of worthlessness or guilt; trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions, and remembering things; frequent thoughts of death, dying, or suicide; crying spells for no apparent reason, as opposed to those triggered by the memories of the fallen world; unexplained physical problems, such as back pain, increased blood pressure and heart rate, nausea, diarrhea, and headaches. Nightmares, goes without saying. (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 51)

The exposed symptoms, despite referring to the psychological crisis arising from the condition of the world in a state of catastrophe, do not differ significantly from the forms of illness of civilized society, functioning again as an index of duplication between the first and the latter. For the diagnosis of surviving individuals who present some combination of these factors, a specific term is created: “The Herkimer Solution to Human Unhappiness” — delivered the big buzzword of the moment: PASD, or Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder” (p. 50), therefore, heightening the impossibility of distinguishing between before
and after the catastrophe or pointing to the semantic similarity between the terms apocalypse and civilization, since both, to a certain degree, represent for the individual the possibility of similar experiences.

From the micro to the macro sphere, work dictates the rhythm of individual and collective existences. Life, even after the devastating effects of the virus, is reconverted to civilized normality and the society/community that restructures itself does so through the optimization of work: society is above all an efficient machine. As Maurizio Lazzarato (2019) reminds us when he points back to Lewis Mumford’s concept of super-machine: “Society as a super machine entails, organizes and arranges in a simultaneous movement human beings and tech machines” (LAZZARATO, 2019, p. 107). We gauge this constitution by dealing with the undead’s pile of bodies: levels of disposal ranging from manual work carried out on the streets, by people positioned in Mark Spitz’s role, to the solution at an industrial level using furnaces, a latent reference to the Nazi *modus operandi*. Colson Whitehead elaborates such process through the narrative in the following terms:

The dead creaked forth in groups of a dozen, then five at a time, in pairs, and finally solo, taking their proper place atop the heaps of corpses as they were cut down. The soldiers steadied themselves atop the corpses in turn and drew the bead. They made hills. Putrefying mounds on the cobblestones of the crooked streets of the financial district. (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 69)

There is always, as perceived throughout the narrative, an intertwining between the apocalyptic *ethos* and a detail that dismantles the possibility of dissociation between this world and the criticism aimed at contemporary lifestyle. In Sorensen’s (2014) words:

The continuity between these depictions of the city makes it clear that for Whitehead, the zombie apocalypse does not transform urban space into a death-world; it simply exposes the monstrousness that lurks beneath everyday urban existence. (SORENSEN, 2014, p. 586)

The observation of this continued nature between late modernity and apocalypse is endowed with another possible sense: that the narrative speaks to our time, trying to make explicit the impact of our habits and actions in the times to come. At least this seems to be Hicks’s (2016) line of argument when she emphasizes continuity in these molds stating that Whitehead’s zombie

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2 “É a sociedade enquanto megamáquina que engendra, organiza e agencia num mesmo movimento os seres humanos e as máquinas técnicas” (in the “original”).

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apocalypse registers: “the ongoing influence of modern socioeconomic practices, aesthetic modes, and subject positions in the new millennium” (HICKS, 2016, p. 107). In our view, this weight attributed to individual actions, even if it is thought abstractly according to the logic of an imagined global community, has no effect if it does not take into account the real global macro-structural to manage and drive these actions: consummate capitalism and practices of life that are managed through neoliberal logic; in this sense, the reading of Hicks lacks a broader look, in the real sense of the term.

Regarding the previous passage, the detail is the allusion to space, the financial district, as a comparative link regarding the idea of dead, rotting and discarded bodies. The representation of excessive and already rotten bodies, as an urgency to be resolved, takes place in the same environment with which the functioning of the capitalist machine operates in relation to society. In this sense, we have a socio-economic dynamic that feeds back: the activities that take place in the financial district are the guarantee that the bodies continue to secure the treatment they receive, and the way in which the bodies are treated guarantees the unharmed maintenance of the financial activities. One is the result and cause of the other, and vice versa.

It might be objected, then, in what sense a questioning about the individual and his ways of life could be pertinent here. We think that it is mainly through the erasing of this individual in the molds of the classical Enlightenment that the basis of contemporary capitalism is built. Values such as equality, liberty and fraternity become unattainable abstractions precisely because they are irreconcilable with the proper functioning of the social machine. At the risk of seeming incongruous, then, we return to the founding maxim of neoliberalism to rethink it: if there are only individuals and not society, what would these individuals express? Or better yet: would they be the expression resulting from what, precisely? At this point we bring up again the figure of the undead, the zombie, which has permeated pop culture for decades and is, specifically, the incarnation we find at the heart of Zone one. If there is space for individuals in contemporary capitalism, they will certainly be thought of as bodies, as receptacles, deprived of the intersubjective potentials proclaimed by the early foundations of the democratic state rooted in the philosophy of Enlightenment: capitalism promotes (and sustains itself from) the systematic dehumanization of these beings.

As we witness in Zone one, dealing with disposable creatures is, to a large extent, guided by a philosophy sprouting from our own times. During a quick debate in an almost small talk tone with the Lieutenant responsible for running the teams, after a working day, Mark Spitz and Kaitlyn try to make the point of differentiating humans from stragglers, but the lieutenant sustains otherwise: “No, you’re right. Mustn’t humanize them. The whole thing breaks down unless
you are fundamentally sure that they are not you” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 136), the logic of the I vs. the menacing other depends on a compulsive affirmation of inhabited places, as well as on constituted and legitimized practices, it also depends on the fight against difference, and on the maintenance of a vigil state that must guarantee protection against the unknown transformed into a homogeneous mass to be always rejected and, if possible, eliminated.

There is, therefore, the instrumentalization of a psyche aimed at dehumanization and this, in turn, is a solid base on which the capitalist building is firmly fixed. It is noteworthy that the State, or what is left of its general structure, continues to be the operator of this whole system. Mark Spitz reiterates on several occasions that it, the State, fulfills this role: a provider of an illusory normality: “this was government. That was reconstruction. The end on hold” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 146). From this angle, the “end in abeyance” formula is the one that best translates our hypothesis, since what actually suffers a temporary shake-up, but only temporary enough for an even more effective rearrangement, is a material structure upon which our civilizational bases are anchored, as this depends heavily on a well-registered human apparatus so that it can effectively operationalize the continuity of the system itself.

Seen in this way, Mark’s perception on this resumption seems to leave little room for optimistic interpretations regarding drastic changes in the way this instrumentalization has been conducted and how it is re-presented: “Now the world was muck. But systems die hard—they outline their creators and unlike plagues of not require individual hosts—and thus it was a well-organized muck with a hierarchy, accountability, and, increasingly, paperwork” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 140). The old structures are, above all, a guarantee of comfort and normality. These come at the expense, of course, of a superficial reflection on the role played by each one in maintaining the current order. Let us pay attention to the narrator’s words once more: “Mark Spitz had to admit that he preferred things now that Buffalo was in charge, replicating the old governmental structures. [...] but it seemed to work, the return of the old laws” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 80) – this demonstrates one more characteristic feature of the notion of individual as it presents itself from neoliberal practices and contemporary capitalism: there is little individual implication in relation to collective destiny, and when there is such implication, it should be confined to the sphere of self-satisfaction and restricting itself, many times, to the mere assurance of survival.

In the exemplary case of the zombie figure and in relation to the delimited spaces, there is still one last trace that is worth highlighting: the notion of private property. Constantly cornered by the physical threat posed by the homogeneous mass of the undead, the inhabitants of Zone one and, by
extension, all post-virus remnants, find in physical shelter the most effective way to prolong their existence:

As before, home was a beloved barricade. When school, work, the many-headed beast of strangers and villains comprising the world threatened to destroy, home remained, family remained, and the locks would hold, the lullabies would ward off all bogeymen. He was trapped in this house and he couldn’t think of where else he’d rather be. (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 156)

Despite its idyllic reminiscence content, the passage invites us to grasp more than the image of the home as a simple representation of a privileged locus of survival, whether relating to the protagonist’s past or regarding the house now occupied by him. The barricade that is raised fulfills the function of a well-defined boundary that works from dichotomies: inside x outside, safety x danger, us x them, comfort x helplessness. Owning the house, both during the apocalypse and in the contemporary apocalyptic world, becomes a satisfactory goal: the opposite of ownership would result in fear, insecurity, and uncertainty in a world where the logic of subsistence goes hand in hand with the dynamics of ownership. Once again Whitehead succeeds in giving vent to the motives that drive individuals, whether pre-collapse or post-collapse, emphasizing the idea of continuity and inseparability between one and the other.

In this logic, the zombie or hordes of zombies play with ambiguous meanings: they denote both the contemporary perception of the emptied individual – understood as a body and passive receptacle of social norms – as they embody the modern fear that targets surplus populations and that devastates societies divided into classes. Spitz himself is able to easily see himself entangled in this gradual dehumanization that binds them all together in a uniform mass, and this happens in his own sphere of work: “Without that human touch, he was told, they might as well push that rudimentary artificial-intelligence algorithm the nerd-practitioners cooked up, which everyone knew was a bust even before the battery of focus groups weighed in. In soul” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 131). At first glance, in the novel, the zombie appears to be indistinguishable, later it has reinforced this indistinguishability through generalizing characterizations, for example, clothes, ways of walking, besides mentions to one or another profession. Both zombies and contemporary individuals lack an authentic substrate that does justice to the use of the term individual: being singular, particularized, referring to some form of specificity and distinction. Thus, it is not the deteriorated and disposable body that unites zombie and contemporary subject, but the lack of soul, in Spitz’s words: “no soul” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 131).
FINAL REMARKS

The apothecary culmination of this entire process of transposition between civilization and apocalypse, and of the attempt to continue the former in the latter, is not optimistic. At least from Mark Spitz’s perspective. What happens is that the anti-hero’s great act of bravery in *Zone One* is a kind of leap to death. In the final scene of the novel, the protagonist finds himself facing a super invasion of the *stragglers*, the degenerate half-undead, that when put together form a great mass, impossible to be contained and involuntarily thirsty to spread throughout the urban space.

However, that does not stop him from acting and continuing what he sees as an endless journey between one human camp and another, and so on, until he finds the last one. Such bravery has its dramatic effect reduced by the narrator’s own evaluative construction: in the interval of a few pages, he repeats that there are no objective criteria, in the current situation, and comparing the habits and modes of existence of civilized humans and decaying undead, that differentiate them: Spitz comes to the conclusion: “No escape. This was the plane where Mark Spitz lived. They were all him. Middling talents who got by barnacles on humanity’s hull, survivors who had not yet been extinguished” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 186).

Thus, on the closing pages of the novel, we follow a huge invasion by the undead into a once secured area. The invasion is a result of unsupervised area full of tunnels inhabited by unnoticed zombies. Then, when the protagonist must decide whether he stays behind to succumb to the big, unavoidable invasion of living-dead, that will end up bringing ultimate destruction to his area, *Zone One*, he makes considerations in this regard and he comes to conclusions that corroborate the idea of indiscernibility between the living and the dead, and by extension, apocalypse and civilization.

When observing the untamable mass in front of him, before making up his mind and choosing to face the odds and try to survive somehow, the reader is saluted with a description somewhat universal in the final content that sets the tone for the great invasion: “All the misery of the world channeled through this concrete canyon, the lament into which humanity was being transformed person by person. Every race, color, and creed was represented in this congregation that funneled down the avenue” (WHITEHEAD, 2011, p. 208), the undead (as well as the living, prior to them), subsist in the urban space, actually being molded in forms of living, or in this case, not living, that makes it more than impossible to differentiate among them the singularity of each individual: it makes it pointless. The broad picture of the gigantic mass is set to be a metaphor of humankind destiny under neoliberal aegis.
It is not, therefore, about knowing here if the protagonist is successful in the journey he starts, since success there would be just one more founding category of the very event, the apocalyptic situation, that is presented to us. It seems more viable to suppose a possibility of catching a glimpse of the ineluctable character of the order’s gradual collapse or, one could easily put it that way, of the molds of civilization as we conceive them and from which we live. Whitehead’s narrative, in the reading hereby carried out, points to modern lines of force that govern the homo economicus’s existence and, when representing them, shows that there is, in fact, a continuity between civilization and apocalypse, using the idea of apocalypse as an artifice at the service of the representation of the very notion of civilization.

REFERENCES


