



**04**

---

**Leoni  
Flower  
Finocchiaro**

**Deconstruction and the future in  
Colson Whitehead's *Zone One***

Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) has widely been discussed as a zombie novel, dealing with the condition of society in capitalist realism, a term coined by Mark Fisher. In a way, by being a zombie novel, *Zone One* deals with possibilities of survival, human relationships and, in its specific case, with the rebuilding of a zombie infested society and the power play behind it. In the novel, although all has changed, nothing seems to have changed, as the government works on re-establishing the lost way of life, making the novel susceptible to criticism and interpretation connected to questions of capitalism and the postmodern era. Based on the idea that in postmodern society people are unable to imagine the future as well as possible alternatives to capitalism, capitalist realism plays with Jameson's notion of late capitalism. Jameson states that late capitalism is based on constant cycles reproducing the present state of the system in order to keep it in place. This is why Fisher uses the term capitalist realism, "the phrase attributed to Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, ... [because] it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher 6). In the same vein, many critics have used Whitehead's *Zone One* as an example of how this inability to imagine alternatives to capitalism and the future plays out in postmodern works of literature. It is the goal of this essay to offer a different perspective, one which would reveal the novel's pointing to a possible alternative rather than being merely a projection of a world that "seems more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it" (Fisher 6). In this paper, a parallel is drawn between the protagonist, Mark Spitz, and his refusal to imagine the future, and poststructuralist deconstruction, showing that Spitz's actions could be read as a way of preparing the system he lives in for the arrival of something new, which will completely change the world.

Although mostly used as an example of capitalist realist actualities, the absolutely bleak prospects of contemporary society in *Zone One* have been called into question by many critics, one of them being Leif Sorensen. In his "Against the Post-Apocalyptic: Narrative Closure in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*," Sorensen focuses on the closure of the narrative and categorizes the moving forces in the novel's post-apocalyptic environment. In doing this, he singles out three such moments that interact with the idea of the future in the novel (Sorensen 561): first, the idea that a return to normalcy is possible - the stance represented by the new provisional government in Buffalo and the movement of "the American Phoenix"; second, the protagonist's attitude, which Sorensen defines as "a narrative of becoming, in which humanity must adapt to a hostile, potentially post-human world" (565); and third, a closure in which "against the late-capitalist fantasy of a future that consists of an endless reproduction of the present, Whitehead offers the shocking possibility of an absolute ending" (561). This paper agrees with the idea that Mark Spitz refuses Reconstructionist ideals but doesn't follow the line of thought resulting in the conclusion that the ending of the novel represents an end to Spitz's philosophy of life as Sorensen states (569). In fact, the readers get introduced to Spitz's refusal to think about and plan the future from the very start: "Mark Spitz believed he had successfully banished thoughts of the future (...)

You never heard Mark Spitz say 'When this is all over' or 'Once things get back to normal' or other sentiments of that brand, because he refused them" (Whitehead 27-28). The attitudes belonging to Sorensen's American Phoenix context, mainly the idea of the possibility of a return to normalcy, even get compared to a pandemic by the protagonist: "The mistake lay in succumbing to the prevailing illusions. Giving in to the pandemic of pheenie<sup>1</sup> optimism that was inescapable nowadays and made it hard to breathe, a contagion in its own right" (Whitehead 17). It is clear that Mark Spitz does not believe in the American Phoenix and in what the new government plans to achieve by, hopefully, clearing out Zone One in Manhattan. There are times when the readers catch the protagonist wanting to look the other way and give in to the ideals of reconstruction: "Mark Spitz's hosts began to air their post-plague plans and schemes (...) He told himself: Hope is a gateway drug, don't do it" (Whitehead 153), but this paper aims to show that the problem lies in the prefix "re-"<sup>2</sup> for Mark Spitz. All that the government in Buffalo is trying to achieve is to re-build, re-construct, and re-surrect America to re-turn to the way things used to be before the zombie apocalypse, and the same logic gets transferred to the survivors: "They each wanted to resume where they left off. Go back to the place where they were safe" (Whitehead 154). Thus, the goal of the American Phoenix is to go back to a world in which Mark Spitz used to be purposeless and mediocre, a world full of inequality and filth, a world which, as can be seen throughout the novel, has not changed much at all. This paper will show this common thread which weaves itself between the pre-apocalypse and post-apocalypse world in *Zone One* through the motifs of New York City and life in capitalist realism and the analogy between the survivors and the zombies.

Early on in the novel, the reader gets a glimpse of NYC through one of Spitz's many flashbacks: "He remembered how things used to be (...) Time chiselled at elegant stonework, which swirled or plummeted to the sidewalk in dust and chips and chunks. Behind the facades their insides butchered, reconfigured, rewired according to the next era's new theories of utility" (Whitehead 11). The description of New York architecture is eerily reminiscent of the state of urban areas Mark Spitz finds himself in during the plague and, in fact, he declares that "New York City in death was very much like New York City in life" (Whitehead 60). This reminiscence is not simply a matter of architecture as the Chinatown of today, "this section of Zone One contain[ing] (...) the busiest streets in the city now" (Whitehead 43), gets compared to the Chinatown of Spitz's childhood: "It was the stereotype of fast-talking, fast-walking, eagerly lacerating New York distilled into a potent half mile" (Whitehead 43). With places such as Chinatown and Central Park, the similarities between pre- and post-apocalyptic postmodern life and people are drawn. In New York City, the readers also first get introduced to the similarity between people and zombies which are shown throughout the novel in descriptions of their ways of moving, their expressions and the way in which they spend their days: "All these skels visiting the Big City like they did before all the shit went down. Piling into tour buses for a Broadway matinee" (Whitehead 84). This similarity gets further utilized throughout the novel, especially through

the protagonist's inner monologues and instances in which he recognizes the characteristics of people from his past life in the zombies he crosses paths with. Mark Spitz recognizes features of his teacher and ex-girlfriends in the stragglers he encounters and this is only a small part of his PASD (post-apocalyptic stress disorder), which seems to worsen towards the end of the novel. Another characteristic of his PASD is the fact that Spitz starts to sympathize more and more with the stragglers. Not only does he let the first straggler he meets go (a man standing in a field), but he also proposes leaving a straggler he and his group find on one of their missions (Whitehead 74). Human life seems to have lost its purpose and goal, making the stragglers' state of existence<sup>3</sup> and suicide, as is the case with the Lieutenant in the novel<sup>4</sup>, desirable to an extent. The description of post-apocalyptic life in the novel could also be read as an evocation of the realities of life under capitalist realism: "There was no other reality apart from this: move on to the next human settlement, until you find the final one, and that's where you die" (Whitehead 216). It seems as though human life has not changed much with the advent of the plague and this is not the only quote pointing to a continuum: "*Survivors are slow or incapable of forming new attachments, or so the latest diagnosis droned, although a cynic might identify this as a feature of modern life merely intensified or fine-tuned with the introduction of the plague*" (Whitehead 50). Based on the analogies between the pre- and post-apocalyptic world in *Zone One*, it seems as if what Mark Spitz is really refusing is the state of things in general, regardless of the plague and no matter the government. He fights against the only system he has ever known, not being able to propose an alternative, since, to him, such innovation remains unimaginable.

This paper wants to explore the analogy between *Zone One* and poststructuralism against Sorensen's analysis of the novel's protagonist. Mark Spitz's refusal of the new order of things in post-apocalyptic America leads to something new – to invention, to use a term often employed by Jacques Derrida. This paper follows the idea that Mark Spitz's trajectory throughout the novel, along with the instances of his refusal to imagine the future and take part in "pheneie optimism" and the gradually increasing symptoms of PASD he starts showing towards the end of the novel, opens the passageway for this innovation. In this sense, Mark Spitz can be seen as a deconstructionist critic, thoroughly analysing the text he finds himself in and gradually loosening the inner screws of the system and realities (a stand-in for the text) he is surrounded by to let through the future. The aforementioned notion of the future derives from Jacques Derrida's idea of invention in his *Signature Event Context and Psyche – Inventions of the Other*, where he states that an invention, in order to be recognized as one, has to be, at least to an extent, already known and has to be an event.<sup>5</sup> This level of familiarity is gradable – the more recognizable a new piece of literature is, the less innovative it is. Every text, according to poststructuralism, is situated on a scale between being completely readable/translatable/known and being the complete opposite. Using this analogy, the zombies in *Zone One* are compared to a kind of innovation – already known, yet completely new, and with this, the

final zombie wave and ending of *Zone One* to the event bringing the future. Unlike in Sorensen's theory of an absolute ending, it is Mark Spitz who becomes the harbinger of a new and different kind of invention and a previously unimaginable future. In this sense, deconstruction as such can be considered as a kind of anti-structuralism. According to structuralist theorists, the structure predicts and categorizes all that can ever exist and can be produced in a given area of study, in this case, literature. Derrida, however, saw the paradox of this system, in that it automatically deactivates any kind of innovation in the literary world. Literary works that have historically changed the way literature is seen and dealt with would have never existed if an ultimate system existed. So, although Derrida fights mostly against Western metaphysics in general (meaning aspects such as logocentrism, phonocentrism, the supremacy of the metaphysical over the physical, etc.), Western metaphysics can, nevertheless, be compared to capitalist realism and, even further, in the case of *Zone One*, to the system Mark Spitz feels submerged in. With this in mind, the thorough deconstructing of the horizon of expectations in the literary field, which opens the way to great innovations, is exactly what Mark Spitz does in *Zone One* on a larger scale. True innovations are events in the sense that they do something to the environment where they happen. Great literary works change canons and notions of what literature is. The final zombie wave in *Zone One* can be seen as such an invention, innovation, and event. From this perspective, Spitz's refusal to think about the future can also be considered an inability to do so. He fights against the system which is the only thing he knows, not knowing what will change it and how. It is as if the future were this placeholder term for that which remains unknown to him up until its advent. Nonetheless, Mark Spitz's refusal is relentless and profound in all of what he does. As Whitehead asserts: "He was the one left to explain it all to the sceptical world after the end credits (...) the real movie started after the first one ended, in the impossible return to things before" (116). Preparing the way for the future is Mark Spitz's purpose in life and, as the future approaches, Spitz starts feeling ever more alive and his PASD retreats. It is as if this future event, which he has steadily been walking toward, preannounced itself in different stages of the novel: "They were falling apart but it would take a long time until the piece was finished. Only then could it sign its name. Until then, they walked" (Whitehead 94). Other even more deconstruction-sounding examples appear later in the novel: "All it took was one flaw in the system, a *bug roosting deep in the code*, to initiate the cascade failure" (Whitehead 155), and "When the wall fell, it fell quickly, as if it had been waiting for this moment, *as if it had been created for the very instant of its failure*" (Whitehead 187). It is not that the future simply preannounces itself, but it seems to be a constituent part of the current state of affairs and surroundings Mark Spitz finds himself in, which seems to point to the same relationship that exists between Derrida's invention and the elements of something familiar invention entails. As the novel gets closer to the event marking the advent of this very poststructuralist idea of the future, Mark Spitz's thoughts on the future start getting clearer, and his purpose seems to make him snap out of the monotonous refusals of his deconstructionist work: "This was where he belonged" (Whitehead 211).

Despite the fact that the future following this event remains a mystery for the readers (who also live in a capitalist realist world as Mark Spitz does), it does not mean that it does not exist or that it is the absolute end of the world as Sorensen proposes. The future remains unknown to Spitz as well, which is only logical as what he was working to let through is an invention, something absolutely new, somehow still familiar: "He didn't know if the world was doomed or saved, but whatever the next thing was, it would not look like what came before" (Whitehead 216).

In conclusion, the ending of *Zone One* fittingly recapitulates the paper's thesis, mainly that Mark Spitz's refusal to indulge in thinking about the future can be compared to Derridean deconstructionist work – preparing the ground for the event of a true, innovative future, which remains unknown to both the reader and the protagonist:

Why they'd tried to fix this island in the first place, he did not see now. Best to let the broken glass be broken glass, let it splinter into smaller pieces and dust and scatter. Let the cracks between things widen until they are no longer cracks but the new places for things. This was where they were now. The world wasn't ending: it had ended and now they were in the new place. They could not recognize it because they had never seen it before. (Whitehead 216-217)

This paper ends on this note, with a look towards the future and different future ways in which concepts such as capitalist realism and deconstruction can be used to deal with contemporary literary works and other mediums in their fundamentally postmodern character of questioning the reality that surrounds them.

## End Notes

- 1 Relating to the American Phoenix, the Reconstructionist organisation standing for the government's effort to reconstruct the world as it was before the zombie apocalypse.
- 2 Sorensen's treating of the prefix "post-" in studies of contemporary culture has influenced the idea of focusing on the prefix "re-" ( Sorensen 590)
- 3 Stragglers live in a static and very repetitive way. They are mostly unaggressive and passive. It is often assumed throughout the novel that they are stuck in a moment that turned out to be somehow important in their past lives.
- 4 The Lieutenant is a figure of great authority representing the Reconstructionist momentum who commits suicide in the novel.
- 5 "...the event supposes in its allegedly present and singular intervention a statement which in itself can be only of a repetitive or citational structure, or rather (...) of an iterable structure" (Derrida, 326), from "Signature Event Context" in *Margins of Philosophy*.

## Works cited

- Derrida, Jacques. *Psyche – Inventions of the Other. Volume 1*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2007.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Alan Bass. "Signature Event Context." *Margins of Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Zero Books, 2009.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1991.
- Sorensen, Leif. "Against the Post-Apocalyptic: Narrative Closure in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 55, No. 3, University of Wisconsin Press, 2014. pp. 559-592.
- Whitehead, Colson. *Zone One*. Vintage Books, 2012.