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**THE ZOMBIE OFFICE: GENRE AS A LENS ON WORK CULTURE IN LING MA'S
NOVEL "SEVERANCE"**

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INTRODUCTION

Post-apocalyptic fiction is a part of the apocalyptic genre, which introduces a broad variety of narratives exploring key fears and anxieties of humanity, as well as systemic issues. Studies of post-apocalyptic fiction are no less varied. Some (Palmer 2021) highlight key aspects, the temptation of imagined catastrophe (as escapism) and the reflection of reality (in response to war, 9/11 and other disasters of immeasurable scale). Whereas others (Sudhinaraset 2024) focus more on the regenerative qualities highlighted by select apocalyptic texts, disruption of old, racist systems, transformation of not just individual lives, but whole infrastructures. Even the key figures in most apocalyptic fiction, zombies, are not set in stone, but allow a template of sorts that can be studied and reveal both philosophical questions of what is human and what is not, our own monstrous faces (Pielak & Cohen 2014). As well as what we fear the most at the moment (fellow humans turning on one another, the “other”, plagues of unknown origin, mass destruction and violence) and what problems we encounter in our day to day life. Therefore, post-apocalyptic fiction is both useful and topical, as its flexibility allows for a nuanced discussion and critique of almost any phenomenon.

The text I selected for my research, Ling Ma’s “Severance” , uniquely reflects the issues I am interested in exploring and presents an opportunity to look at it through a dual lens of both genre and sociology. In its modern take, the post-apocalyptic genre strays away from the conventional traditional apocalypse narratives more associated with disasters, Biblical apocalypses and prophets. Even amongst other contemporaries, “Severance” does not stick to mere escapist fantasies or exploration of societal dynamics in disaster; at its core it is an unusual post-apocalyptic novel. It is a popular novel, not only because of its topical nature, the portrayal of a pandemic originating in China, or its discussion of racism, work related issues, such as mistreatment of workers and cheap labour. It has received quite a few scholarly analyses and articles discussing it, however none so broad or genre focused to really breach its most important quality - the hybrid of post-apocalyptic and office novel genres, how that works in the novel’s favor, and strengthens its themes. For instance, Day (2018) mentions its fluidity in switching between genres and importance as a critique of capitalism, yet focuses more on the author and her creative process. Schaab (2021) discusses its theme of misogyny in post-apocalyptic literature, whereas Quaßdorf (2019) focuses on “Severance” through its identity as an office novel in particular.

“Severance” explores a variety of issues, while presenting an acute critique of our modern society; one which does not fall back into heroes rebuilding “what used to be”, while hordes of flesh eating zombies stalk them and their small group of survivors. Instead, in this iteration of the apocalypse, zombies become the non-violent, nevertheless disturbing main symbol of the real-life pandemic of workers reduced to their basic routines of meaningless tasks and emails. This research is partly inspired by my Scandinavian culture studies and work experience. Scandinavian work culture is often praised for its attention to the worker and in particular, work-life balance. In “Severance” the lack of work life balance is pushed to its highest degree, which becomes humanity’s downfall, spurred on from an unknown fungal plague.

The subject of my research is representation of work culture, the relevance of which is evident with growing discussions of burnout in a capitalistic world (Illing 2019).

The aim is to analyze how genre conventions highlight work life issues. Specifically, how work culture is portrayed in a post-apocalyptic novel, reflecting a capitalist system and its effects, through a blend of genres (post-apocalyptic and the office novel), while being grounded in reality (sociological lens).

The research questions I have raised in response to said aim:

1. What problems arise when linking the genre and the work of fiction?
2. How does the genre influence how sociological issues such as work culture in capitalism are approached in “Severance”, a modern post-apocalyptic novel? And why does that specifically reflect modern anxieties and possible scenarios, as opposed to pure escapist fiction.

The objectives of this research paper are:

1. Explore how “Severance” employs and questions genre conventions, in order to focus on “Severance’s” differentiation from the ‘norm’.
2. Analyze ways zombies represent modern workers and their exploitation.
3. Analyze what that says about society and its capitalistic system, through such attitudes to work, lack of work and life balance being likened to an imminent apocalypse.

The analysis will be carried out using primarily genre analysis, further detailed in the ‘Methodology’ section of the paper.

Key terms: post-apocalypse, work culture, neoliberalism, capitalism, zombies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Architextuality and genre theory

An architext generally refers to a type of transtextuality, the term originally raised by Gerard Genette, and consists of categories (discourse, literary genres) from which a text emerges (Herman 1998, p. 1044). However, more broadly it is defined by scholars as a relationship between a text and its genre (Carney 2012, p. 235), a “taxonomy of texts” (Pier 1992, p. 12), further highlighting the issue of reader expectations (Stewart 2019, p. 117) and how authors deal and improve upon notions set forth by the genre as a whole. An architext can also be described as a medium formed by other texts, to which a text belongs to (according to Rima Bertašavičiūtė, as defined in *Avantekstas*). While genre categories are broad and often disputed based on their subjective divisions (science fiction, dystopia, post-apocalyptic fiction could be referred to being under the same umbrella and are therefore linked), an analysis of a particular text through its genre provides a necessary, broader look into what a particular text could be influenced by and how these influences are reflected in the text. Although post-apocalyptic fiction is not a new phenomenon, its resurgence and a metaphorical breaking away from the established science fiction genre reflects particularities that cannot be properly analyzed merely through the individual text itself or its themes, as topical as they may be, they build upon what was written in the genre beforehand.

Daniel Chandler, a prominent semiotician, in his overview on genre theory highlights two types of genre definitions: conventional and alternative. Conventional includes the notion that genres have a set of themes and settings shared by their texts (Chandler 1997, p. 2), however Chandler follows up this definition by stating that texts are not fixed to a single genre, logically, it is hardly possible for it to be exhibiting all the traits of said genre consistently. Alternative definitions reflect the “typicality” of both the text and the reader (Chandler 1997, p. 5). While the former definition may seem too abstract in its undefinedness (questions of quantity of themes or tropes used, necessary for such a categorization arise), the latter places, in my view, too much emphasis on the audience. The aforementioned “typicality”, as Chandler concludes, also invites a hierarchization of texts that could prove to be detrimental to an objective analysis. Chandler (1997, p. 8) goes on to emphasize the communicative aspect of genres, mediation between audience expectations and author aspirations in the limitations of their chosen genre.

Genres as a whole are not strict categories, rather, they are more akin to resemblances between a large group of texts that influence one another (Chandler 1997, p. 1-3,5) that can be useful in enhancing our understanding of each individual one. Luckhurst (2015, p. 13), on the other hand, highlights the spiral evolution pattern of the genre, not only through its repetition of tropes, but also their modification, further along the evolutionary line: “[...]not typologies with fixed categories to tick off like a game of bingo”. It would, therefore, be possible to claim that analysing a text through a genre could be more akin to analysing through the genre’s transformation, rather than mere resemblances between individual texts, their specific elements or repetition of these elements (or lack thereof). This method would bring in an additional layer of nuance to the analysis, as Luckhurst (2015, p. 187) points out, a genre’s development is highly subjective, depending on regions and specific contexts.

As “fuzzy” as Chandler repeatedly emphasizes genres themselves to be, they do have their limitations that they impose on works if they were to be categorized into one genre or another. One would not expect to find apocalyptic elements in any contemporary novel, but could find contemporary elements in the apocalyptic, if the two were reversed, meaning that there is logic to the structure of a text of a particular genre and that breaking of such rules has to be done with particular reason (whether applying genre conventions in a specific way or foregoing them as a means of highlighting a specific theme). There is a particular merit to be found by viewing a text through its “genre context” that other kinds of analysis would not divert the reader’s attention to in such a clear-cut way.

This sort of interpretation method allows for a more nuanced perspective on both the content of the text itself, as well as the surrounding “content” (or context) in which it was written. A genre-typical text provides what Chandler refers to as a “cultural capital” (Chandler 1997, p. 7), in other words, a base understanding of the elements of a genre, necessary and beneficial for construction of meaning. This benefits not only the reader’s understanding, but also ways in which the author can use or change tropes and elements to further enrich the particular narrative they are trying to create. This can include conventions and tropes most often encountered in a genre (such as the concept of apocalypse as a whole (what can be expected of its impact), survivors, pastoralist utopia and so on)) upon which subversions, modernisations and re-interpretations are built upon, meaning that if there were no foundation, there would be nothing to subvert (at least not in any meaningful way).

Therefore, genre analysis gives the reader the tools necessary for the analysis itself, tailored to its specific context. While multiple texts may use the same tropes that categorize them in the same genre on principle, their use and combinations can be drastically different based on the text's background context and produce different results in both analysis and interpretation. For example, without being aware of the genre's tendency for protagonists to move from the city to the countryside, as a fantasy of not only escapism, but return to a simpler, more traditional time, one would not appreciate the ways in which a text would subvert this (arguably, more importantly, would not question the significance of such a change).

Social issues and the current political climate are undeniable factors in the resurgence of post-apocalyptic fiction in the 21st century and the themes and tropes used interplay with said context, make modern iterations of post-apocalyptic fiction stand out in the genre by "responding" to it (Chandler 1997, p. 4), building on old conventions in new and unseen ways that tackle relevant issues. The issues chosen to tackle and the way it is done, highlight the context lying underneath the text, which can be uncovered through a mix of analysis done through both genre and sociological lenses, merging the two contexts and looking at them as a whole, rather than two vaguely connected possible paths.

Palmer (2021) echoes this in his analysis of the post-apocalyptic genre. He does so two-fold, both from a set number of themes and concepts available and often built upon in the genre, but also throughout history, thus cementing the need and influence of historical context. According to Palmer, post-apocalyptic fiction evolves through distinguishing new from the old, in order to respond to the urgency to new threats (Palmer 2021, p. 3). The genre's history can be seen as history directly influencing apocalyptic modernism (Palmer 2021, p. 57), coming to terms with generality and abstraction of the apocalypse (Palmer 2021, p. 35), reflecting history's more unpleasant aspects back at us (Palmer 2021, p. 117) and the inevitability of death (Palmer 2021, p. 295). In other words, all changes in the apocalyptic genre reflect our own changes back at us, along with a more nuanced view of both society, modernity and our past, which helps not only to make sense of complex situations, but comforts in drastically radical scenarios.

1.2. The office novel architext

The genre of the office novel provides a welcome bridge between literary genre and social critique elements, combining the two, and is important to understand in wanting to discuss how work life and attitudes towards it are portrayed in literature. Tolentino (2019) aptly describes the genre as “a perennially depressed”, whereas Gyarkye (2021) points out its deceptively orderly nature. The genre raises questions of agency and role in a corporate system (Quaßdorf 2019, p.80). Mainly, its seemingly simple structure of characters rejecting the corporal conformity and hierarchy is underlined by capitalism and its practices. Most of the elements attributed to the office novel follow a pattern and center the loss of control and identity.

Gyarkye (2021) highlights the sense of distance from the world outside of work often found in office novels, juxtaposing the struggle of individualism and the arbitrariness found in rigid corporal environments. Saval (2014) describes the importance of “manners, sociability, gossip,[...] ‘office politics’”, more so than work itself, despite what the genre’s title could suggest. Kiesling (2016) attributes the tediousness portrayed by the genre to its focus on bureaucracy, but more importantly, implies that it is an inevitability, familiar to most people. This inescapable dread of one’s job proved to be a serious concern at the start of the genre’s history, described as fear of conformity, “crisis of man”, corporations beginning to dominate people’s lives (Saval 2014). This compounds other prominent issues that are often explored in the genre in various ways, for instance, lack of independence (often appearing via highlighting of team play, according to Saval (2014)), issues of worker expendability (Saval 2014) and layers of hierarchies given artificial meaning (Saval 2014).

An important variety of the traditional office novel can be considered office novels specifically written by women, further highlighting the importance of gender (Tolentino 2019) both in fiction and outside of it. As Kiesling (2016) points out, in comparison to their male counterparts, such novels often approach similar issues in drastically different and personalized ways. For example, while issues of bureaucracy are touched upon in both, Kiesling (2016) highlights women’s office fiction more often directly contrasting it with biological matters such as pregnancy, which in turn invite a fusion with other genres, such as horror. This blend of genres makes perfect sense considering the aforementioned problem of worker expendability (at the cost of the worker’s mental and physical health). A pregnancy scenario could not be considered viable by a corporation, hence the horror story for the woman in question. Similarly, Kiesling (2016) highlights work-life balance that women struggle with in particular, since, despite opportunities to work, women are still expected to take care of children, which is exacerbated by issues such as wage gaps and, as Kiesling (2016) adds on, harassment and career expectations, following expectations of what a “woman’s role is”, directly contradicting one another.

Additionally, modern iterations of the office novel further build upon and invert conventions of the genre. As Saval (2014) points out, while the original iterations of the novel feature themes of development (or Bildungsroman, as he compares) contemporary novels feature important subversions that adapt to the times. In particular, authors openly showing their disdain, providing “accounts of the office life” without the details, but as Saval implies, the feelings behind the events. At its heart, the office novel is effective in portraying people’s anxieties and often difficult workplace environments that follow us and adapt overtime, much like how the genre itself has.

As discussed above, office novels can be viewed as a tool to tackle specific work related issues. As Quaßdorf (2019, p.67-68) suggests, it even acts as an indicator for socioeconomic shifts, arguably, environment and work conditions as a whole, but also invites action. Quaßdorf (2019, p. 70-71) highlights the genre as an important exploration of worker agency, mainly, through discussion of absurd fear-based efficiency and redundancy. In other words, the office novel, while portraying work centered issues, perhaps through exaggerated means, retains the safety of exploring these problems in fiction and spurring the readers, who often can relate to or have experienced the same exact issues, to take action in exploring how these issues have persisted and changed throughout the genre.

1.3. On the post-apocalyptic genre

The post-apocalyptic genre can be understood as a part of the broader apocalypse genre focusing, as the name suggests, on events happening after the apocalypse. The post-apocalyptic genre as a whole is rather new and fluid, however to describe it it is important first to understand the key to it – apocalypse. Palmer (2021, p.1-2) defines it as a “signifier of a worrying disaster”, including its connection to people, as being emotionally or imaginatively attractive. He builds on this definition by connecting it with emotions of relief from either frustration, or anxiety (Palmer 2021, p. 6), but mentioning its comforting presence as a story of transformation (Palmer 2021, p. 292) . This is emphasized by the helplessness inhibited by the protagonists, who mostly remain in passive roles in regards to more traditional apocalypse stories (for example, a witness of the apocalypse) (Palmer 2021, p. 287). In a sense, the genre embodies escapism from real world crises, such as wars, 9/11, and more topically, climate change, through the lens of an absolute worst case scenario, globalized and all-consuming, providing a “feeling of release and catharsis” (Walter 2019, p.133).

De Cristofaro supplies a, perhaps, more typical definition of apocalypse. Highlighting elements of “overwhelming proportions” and “the end of the world as we know it”, she

includes the biblical term of revelation (De Cristofaro 2021, p. 3), signifying the genre's complex relationship, clearly seen in its fiction's varied storylines and characters, a clash between the genre's roots and modern iterations. Nevertheless, both authors agree on apocalypse's function of comfort and "sense-making" (De Cristofaro 2021, p. 3) amplifies this, by stating how this sense-making expands into projections of utopia) in spite of its stressful and horror inducing setting.

The genre as a whole is varied, while its foundations are debated among scholars (the influence of biblical imagery and themes, such as concepts of "New Jerusalem", "pastoralism" and character roles, for instance "the messiah"). There are however, some minor deviations or emphasis placed on specific aspects. Luckhurst (2015, p. 182-183) for instance reflects this by noting the aspect of revelation in relation to plagues and apocalypses ("Final Truth"), as an act of interpretation of signs. Even though most cite the bible as an influential source, some scholars (Yeates 2021, p.5) criticize the framing of apocalyptic literature as emerging on the basis of Judeo-Christian theology and mention oral traditions of ancient civilizations. Zimmer (2013, p. 133) echoes this, by stating that focusing too much on Judeo-Christian framing ignores accounts detailing historical destruction outside of this frame. This suggests that the genre as a whole is much older than anticipated, based on its perceived ties to the Bible and therefore, people were making sense of the world, particularly disasters happening around them, through apocalyptic terms. In particular, not necessarily catastrophic global scale events (such as wars or 9/11). However, it also points out the ignorance and unwillingness to face real historical events, similar to the manner of seeking apocalyptic fiction as escapism from mundane reality.

Other descriptions of the genre are rather similar to the norm, but maintain a degree of nuance in regards to contexts outside of the set narrative, such as Zimmer (2013, p. 131-132), who views post-apocalyptic literature as a mix between science fiction and utopia, what he describes as a "sacred register" that maintains a relation to history. While having their differences, it seems that all authors maintain a set of concepts vital to the genre and its understanding, building upon historical context and referencing it in the apocalyptic narrative frame. As Zimmer (2013, p. 132) phrases it, without proper understanding, the apocalypse itself becomes an empty shell void of meaning that can be applied to any narrative with an ending. Naturally, texts in a given genre vary in relation to the tropes used or their use itself, but some of these key concepts remain integral to the themes present in these post-apocalyptic texts.

Important recurring concepts and elements of the genre can be narrowed down to:

- The aforementioned apocalypse (internal, such as escaped viruses or nuclear disasters, or external (alien invasions));
- Dichotomies (a text can contain multiple dichotomies; good versus bad, city versus nature, mundane versus apocalyptic, the elect and the non-elect, old and the new worlds, present and past);
- Utopia (Gonnermann 2019, p. 27, describes a utopia as a boundary between the present and the endless possibilities of the future; whereas Palmer (2021, p. 53) views it as involving the establishment of a transformed society, justice and welfare);
- Transformation or transcendence, also known as the New Jerusalem, which is described as a “utopian renewal” or a transcendental utopian world for the righteous (De Cristofaro 2021, p.8-9)), implies the importance of rigid dichotomies for the genre (or the traditional model, on which it is based. However, as contemporary works are analyzed, the term loses its neutrality. De Cristofaro (2021) takes it even further, by foregrounding the term’s self-validating background, where the end justifies any means necessary;
- Apocalyptic thinking, according to De Cristofaro (2021, p. 30) works in tandem with the given structure and a black-and-white morality that traditional narratives center around. It imposes order on a crisis, in the form of vengeful escapism from a corrupt world, yet it still provides comfort through giving characters a direct purpose (call to action) and luring through the possibility of utopia. Neagu (2017, p. 238) even refers to apocalyptic thinking as a built-in trait, not a way of explaining, but more of a system that represents the world, a construction of reality.

Palmer (2021, p. 6-7) simplifies this concept, centering the term’s inherent dichotomy of oppressors and the oppressed, who are then seeking to replace the oppressors in a vengeful way. It is important to note that both authors mention vengeance, as if apocalyptic thinking is meant to refute non-believers, who in turn, cannot participate in the anticipated utopia or worse, are corrupted in some way (for example, those turned into zombies and therefore, “the enemy” of the chosen-ones/protagonists).

- Pastoralism. According to Alpers (1982, p. 437-438), pastoralism as a concept is almost deceptively simple, despite containing multitudes of definitions (among which one can find: return to a simpler time, fundamental hostility towards urban life), which can in turn invite a reductive view of the concept. If we were to focus on pastoralism in the apocalyptic genre specifically, according to Palmer (2021, p. 80-81), there can be observed a juxtaposition

of both fighting for what is seen as a valuable resource and finding relief, even healing in nature. This kind of movement towards the countryside, further away from disaster, can be interpreted as a form of denial (Palmer 2021, p. 104), not just traditional virtue signaling.

- Specific character archetypes and concepts taken from the bible, such as “the Messiah”, “the Prophet” and “the Antichrist” and what Palmer (2021, p. 17) refers to as a “miracle birth”, gives further structure by narrowing down the roles of the characters.

Palmer (2021) highlights a narrative structure, specific to post-apocalyptic fiction, “catastrophe – aftermath – transcendence” that best summarizes what key themes and concepts can be expected, as well as their simplistic structure that is rather black and white. As De Cristofaro points out (2021, p. 81), any deviation from the norm questions this simplicity. In a way, this sort of narrative structure helps the primary goal of explaining disaster, but also fosters a “us versus them” mentality, moralizing the catastrophe and upholding the values of the “select few” as worthy of transcendence. According to De Cristofaro (2021, p. 34, 40), this explains both the self-righteousness (the end justifies the means) and the misogyny often encountered in apocalyptic fiction. This is strengthened by not only notions of “rebuilding civilization”, but also the “miracle birth”, none of which are directly put on the shoulders of the (usually) male protagonists of apocalyptic fiction (Palmer, p. 53), but rather the women in these stories.

Palmer (2021) and De Cristofaro (2021) focus on the linear development of the genre through differences between what is considered old and how the newly created fiction in the apocalypse genre plays with set conventions and concepts, while retaining a touch of the old, both in characters and its story-beats. According to Palmer (2021) apocalyptic fiction as a whole can be divided into two big groups:

- Traditional;
- Modern (and contemporary; this group is under the modern umbrella according to Palmer, despite it, in my view, being more than merely a mix of both types, distinct enough to warrant its own category);

1.3.1. Traditional post-apocalyptic literature

To better understand the foundational elements and how contemporary iterations of the genre play off of or change tropes, I will present a short list detailing each group below. Concepts typical to the traditional apocalyptic literature:

- Transcendence (usually through the concept of “New Jerusalem”) (Palmer 2021, p. 6-7), which signifies moving away from the mundane;
- Failure of science and/or reason (Palmer 2021, p. 16-17);
- A miraculous birth, which is clearly tied with and references the birth of Christ (Palmer 2021, p.17), at the same time it signifies hope in rebuilding of civilization;
- Character archetypes found in the bible (Messiah, Prophet etc.), which according to Palmer (2021, p.48) give the narrative a rigid structure and the moral dichotomies of good and bad, and faithful and unfaithful. There is also the “deity” (Palmer 2021, p.292), as Palmer explains it, more of an agenda that inexplicably forces the protagonists to try to survive and rebuild civilization;
- A focus on humanity (Palmer 2021, p. 189);
- City versus nature narratives, including elements of pastoralism (as Palmer outlines (2021, p.265), the city is the source of both corrupting evil and violence or disease).

Modern depictions of apocalypse build upon or thematically further said elements to their extremes (pastoralism), but occasionally add their own nuances, not found in the traditional group:

- Redemption and individualism (“apocalypse of consciousness” (Palmer 2021, p.61));
- Cultural pessimism (Palmer 2021, p. 63);
- Affinity between the monster and the civilized (implies comparison and points to narratives in which humans are the metaphorical monsters and the source of the catastrophe, as opposed to outsider forces (for instance in cases of alien invasion));
- Confidence in rationality and science (Palmer 2021, p.79);
- “Domestic pastoral” (Palmer 2021, p. 80), as the author states, the issues of the city and its problems remain in the background, pastoralism becoming the centerpiece of the narrative (Palmer 2021, p. 130);
- Imperative to submit to change, rather than an agenda, as stated before, being more expected of traditional apocalypse narratives. Lack of said agenda includes a sense of defeatism, Palmer (2021, p. 292) refers to this as “self-immolation”.

1.3.2. Contemporary post-apocalyptic literature

Contemporary depictions of apocalypse are notable for featuring multiple elements of both broad types of the genre, but notable for adapting them in unique ways or straying from such conventions entirely. However, as stated before, it is important to look at the broader

historical context, which supplies these changes with new meanings, reflecting the changes in modern society. As Palmer explains it (2021, p. 239) contemporary apocalyptic fiction centers the conflict with the transcendence (of the traditional understanding as an inevitable hard-earned utopia) and the role and cause of the apocalypse itself. Instead of being a singular event that changes life as it is, it becomes an ongoing state (Palmer 2021, p. 264), “a prevailing climate of violence”, instead of some sort of divine intervention guiding humanity to a utopia, before it is too late (Palmer 2021, p. 48). Contemporary apocalyptic fiction features:

- Discord in temporality (influenced by humanity not being such a focus in most contemporary works, authors choosing to follow the aftermath of the catastrophe through more humanoid figures, such as robots, or non-humanoid at all);
- Lack of utopian renewal (De Cristofaro 2021, p. 9), pushing the renewal of civilization to regression, rather than transcendence;
- Revisionism of prevailing narratives (Palmer 2021, p. 201), which De Cristofaro (2021, p. 27) notes in turn as a subversion, implying an intentional reworking altogether, as opposed to direct re-examination;
- Habituation to apocalyptic thinking and/or feeling (Palmer 2021, p. 205);
- Apocalypse as a condition, rather than a singular event, which contains multiple different emergencies (Palmer 2021, p. 205-206), arguably, each treated as its own mini-apocalypse, with necessary attention and seriousness;
- The past aids (or haunts, in the case of material objects and brands, (Fuchs (2019), p.75-76) the future (Palmer 2021, p. 217);
- New society is either not built upon old structures, as done particularly with narratives leaning heavily on themes of pastoralism (Palmer 2021, p. 239), or it relies entirely on the old (De Cristofaro 2021, p. 45, 79), essentially, signifying the mistake in trying to uphold old structures, which were the ones to fail in the apocalypse and/or misguided idealism in thinking the status quo is good enough;
- Mundanity of apocalypse, as opposed to it being escapism from the mundane (Palmer 2021, p. 239);
- Elements of traditional apocalypse narratives, retaining some hope for recovery and order (Palmer 2021, p. 295);
- Presence of death and doom (Palmer 2021, p. 258, 295), which forms the paradoxical structure of contemporary apocalypse fiction containing elements of both optimism (as found

in traditional narratives) and nihilism; however that does not necessarily imply that there is no hope to be found, according to Gonnermann (2019, p. 38) the manifestation of hope is intended outside the narrative (comparing to the fiction in question that while things could certainly be better, they are not yet quite as bad and that there is still time)

- As De Cristofaro notes (2021, p. 44) contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives feature mostly open conclusions, which, perhaps is influenced by said traditional structures in its core, which supply the sense of hope, especially in the agency of its protagonists (De Cristofaro 2021, p. 15);

- However, use of traditional elements can also be done in ways of subversion and parody, as De Cristofaro highlights (2021, p. 81), in order to blur the original simplicity of the narrative and add nuance to both its themes and characters.

Apocalyptic temporality is a concept that makes the contemporary iterations of the genre stand out from the traditional. According to DeCristofaro (2021, p.20-21) this temporality allows apocalyptic fiction to critique the conception of modern history, contemporary fiction targeting apocalyptic logic at its core. Fuchs (2019, p.68) on the other hand, describes it in simpler terms, as a new kind of chronology, dividing the post- and pre-apocalypse further apart, the only means of reconstruction being traces and survivors, highlighting the differences between the two.

1.3.3. Distinctions and divides in the post-apocalyptic genre

De Cristofaro (2021, p. 9) denotes a similar divide in the apocalyptic genre, albeit somewhat simplified, “traditional” and “contemporary.” Yet, both authors agree on a key difference between what is considered “traditional” and “contemporary” - mainly, the approach to and vision of “New Jerusalem” (or its lack, or distortion in contemporary works). Yeates (2021, p. 7-8), on the other hand, proposes to look at the post-apocalyptic genre through its connection to science fiction. However, what he describes as “post-apocalyptic sf” and its reflection of contemporary issues, such as overcrowding, spread of disease and pollution, not only mirrors Palmer’s “contemporary” category, it ignores nuance of difference, in not only the shift between “modern” and “contemporary” that Palmer highlights, but key ways in which post-apocalyptic fiction pulls away from science fiction.

As Palmer points out (2021, p.53) it is important to view how agency is portrayed in apocalyptic literature and science fiction. Protagonists of post-apocalyptic fiction, in comparison to those of science fiction, are closer to regular individuals, in such a way, the

contrast between the events and the protagonist is greater and strengthens the themes of apocalyptic fiction. “Individual power” is portrayed very differently in science fiction (“fascinated by the individual with super powers, most often male” (Palmer 2021, p.53)). The problem of agency and its portrayal ripples down to other aspects of the genre, even other tropes. Luckhurst (2015, p. 9) stresses the loss of agency portrayed by zombies in media, who appear to be dead, but unaware of the fact, as a form of both decline and denial).

This distinction is important, in my view, for several factors. Firstly, the shift between genres is made more clear, thus the focus can be directed to inter-genre distinctions and how they are influenced over the years by both historical events and changing society (and its issues that are becoming more and more prominent). Secondly, the role of agency as a whole is highlighted. As Palmer implies, the protagonists of post-apocalyptic literature are more down to earth in direct contrast to their surroundings (the catastrophic apocalypse and its effects that ripple throughout post-apocalyptic fiction, showing how it affects the so-called everyman). Lack of agency can there signify the overall state of humanity in the face of a crisis. Hopelessness, where there is no “New Jerusalem” to even speak of, demanding radical change and/or submittal to what is outside of our control (Palmer 2021, p.) or, in turn, a belief that we have the power to shift things around and the agency to do so, in spite of systems or their failures (De Cristofaro 2021, p. 15).

Modern or contemporary apocalypse fiction is viewed as a separate category by Palmer (2021), and builds upon previous work by critiquing our “habituation to apocalypse”, turning a lot of the aforementioned tropes and concepts in unique ways, to critique modern society, as opposed to a response to previous events, historical or social (9/11, a plethora of wars and natural disasters). Both Palmer (2021) and De Cristofaro (2021) highlight the importance of the Bible to post-apocalyptic literature, the influence of which seems inescapable. This can be clearly seen in terms such as “New Jerusalem”, used to analyse these texts, in regards to their use, however, the lack of this kind of utopic renewal could be seen as a modern subversion, creating a distance from one context (religious) and moving towards another (nihilistic or on the contrary, perhaps, more hopeful portrayals that do not involve religion or any sort of promise, but focus on the feeling of uncertainty, the source of the problem, rather than the forced solution (=transformation), regardless of the genre’s roots).

In other words, this subversion could be seen as a shift in accountability, as opposed to the threat forcing humans to work together to rebuild something; it is to take accountability

for their own actions that lead to the apocalypse, or a grim reminder, a warning to the reader that for us it is not yet too late. As De Cristofaro (2021, p.139) states, the reproduction of the present (or an older) system indicates a fear of the future. Arguably, this signifies not only the hopelessness of the status quo, but also that there is hope to be had if one were to break out of the loop of holding these flawed systems. De Cristofaro (2021, p. 141-142) summarizes this as a flaw of utopian expectations juxtaposing it with our “monstrous present”.

In spite of the genre’s multitude of themes (from addressing virtues of its protagonists, to approached to the end of the world and what may have caused it), as Palmer (2021, p. 295) states, apocalypse tends to simplify, which is why it is important to view the shift of these conventions and their subversions. The two broad types discussed above (traditional and modern) can be divided even further, by time periods (Palmer 2021, p. 57), but for the sake of clarity and coherence I will be focusing on the broad categories (traditional, modern and contemporary) and their differing elements in order to thoroughly analysed how application and changes made to these elements coincide with other themes, as opposed to minor changes and differences between periods in the same type of apocalyptic fiction, for instance, 1950s and 1960s apocalyptic works.

1.4. Zombies

A familiar figure often encountered in post-apocalyptic fiction is that of the zombie. It connects not only folklore, horror and apocalypse genres, but even delves into the realm of economics (Luckhurst 2015, p. 11), moving up in its scale, from local to a global phenomenon (Hughes 2021, p. 8), “a widespread cultural critique” (Cook 2013, p.54). Its history is as complex as its allegorical potential, perhaps this is the primary factor for zombies in media being as popular as they are. Nevertheless, it never strays away from its apocalyptic roots, by virtue of being seen as a fusion of concepts, Luckhurst (2015, p. 121) indicates the culprits to be political paranoia and Christian apocalyptic thinking.

According to Luckhurst (2015, p. 14, 40) zombies are a highly unstable figure due to decades of mistranslation between cultures and post-colonialist fantasies that distort the originally Haitian folklore figure, but in a way reflect the effects of imperialism and racism, passed on from copy to copy of the same sources. The zombie can be viewed as a symbol for a plethora of concepts: spread of disease, consumerism, migration, capitalism and its detrimental effects on people and ecological concerns. Nevertheless, it is important to point

out that all of these possible meanings are not constant. The zombie allows for a varied set of readings, but that also depends on the context of the narrative. By viewing both the modern and historical context, an irony can be gleaned and some of the meanings (such as migration and the monstrous, diseased other) gain a darker tone. In similar terms, the zombie trope's adaptability is notable for its fusion with other tropes and elements, such as viruses, which were understood as a separate entity in the 1950s (Luckhurst 2015, p.180), moving them onto the apocalyptic genre.

In regards to the escapist fantasy that many apocalyptic stories provide (survivalists rebuilding civilization from the brink of utter destruction), escape from mundanity can be extended through even the most untraditional means. Luckhurst (2015, p. 11) echoes other scholars in their statements of how post-apocalyptic stories can provide a sort of comfort in their escapist narratives, perhaps in spite of the apocalypse in question, by raising zombies as an example. Despite being the monsters in most narratives, he calls it an "exhilarating moment of upheaval" for said zombies that, as one would assume, people are invited to sympathise with. After all, zombies are also rescued from their boring mundane lives, albeit in an even grimmer fashion, and their Utopia seems to mirror that of the traditional apocalyptic understanding (a select few "rebuilding" civilization, where only those like them will remain in the transformed world).

Not only do zombies breach trope boundaries, through their complex history, they imply us to question our culture, history and modern systems as a whole (Luckhurst 2015, p.9), Hughes (2021, p. 9) notes the zombies' potential as a form of critique, forcing the readers to face monsters that mirror us, the systems they are a product of. Therefore, it is no accident that the figure of the zombie eventually becomes associated with contemporary capitalism and globalism (Luckhurst 2015, p. 8, 11). Neagu (2017, p. 239) adds to this, by separating the terms "capitalist apocalypse" and "the global post-apocalypse", while the two are linked, one is the source, while the post-apocalypse is just an aftermath; as the author states, post-apocalypse thus becomes not just a warning (presumably to us, the readers, thus somewhat losing its comforting nature as detailed by other authors), but an integral part of the present, "apocalyptic fantasies of late capitalism (Neagu 2017, p. 238)".

As Luckhurst (2015, p.10) points out, the vital effect the zombie metaphor gives a text is that of the mass, whichever thematic meaning the narrative focuses on, it is amplified by the faceless mass of zombies. Similarly, Fehrle (2016, p.527) views zombies as a vehicle for

multiple fears that encompasses multiple issues, according to him, the metaphor also centers on “capitalist exploitation.”. The key issue, as he points out, is the migration of people; even the diseased zombie encompasses fears of unregulated movement of people and its effects (Fehrle 2016, p.534-535) and not just the fear of contamination. Therefore, it can be said that the zombie as an element of any text can contain multitudes of meaning, even in what seems to be an intentional metaphor. This is achieved through not only globality (most of what Fehrle calls “outbreak” zombie media contain said outbreak as a worldwide phenomenon) and migration, but also through the perspective of non-zombie characters, be it the narrative through survivors of the apocalypse, the witness-protagonist, or the worker and noting their replaceability (Fehrle 2016, p. 534).

In a sense, the zombie allegory, through its multitude of meanings, not only brings together seemingly different issues (“migration, ecology, and global inequality”, (Fehrle 2016, p. 542)), but gives a post-apocalyptic text more concise tools to point to the common source of all these issues - capitalism. Rather than leaning into the genre’s theme of transformation, Fehrle (2016, p. 530) highlights the nihilistic essence of apocalyptic narratives, especially zombie outbreak stories, which he likens to capitalism and the hopelessness of lack of change. Zombie outbreak becomes the capitalist outbreak (a capitalist apocalypse), from which there appears to be no cure. Similarly to the concept of “apocalyptic logic”, Luckhurst (2015, p. 149, 183) highlights the term “capitalist logic” in its relation to zombies and the meaningfulness of this connection, mainly, capitalism’s invasion into all aspects of life, seeking to increase productivity and efficiency.

According to Graeber (2018, p. 134) fiction often features monsters that do not simply hurt or kill humans, but threaten to turn them into monsters, one of the examples he highlights is the zombie. Zombification as a concept is important in regards to its direct ties to both the genre and social critique that it provides. Luckhurst (2015, p. 170,179) views it as viral contagion, mirroring pandemics in fiction in its global scale, created and amplified by modernity and blames it on interconnectedness, highlighting the zombies as an emblem and the world as emblematic of one which is on the brink of the apocalypse. This is signified both through the size of our cities (making pandemics especially dangerous, spread of viruses easy), but also our aforementioned interconnectedness, corporations operating internationally, a whole new side of the world easily accessible, lenient to capitalist demands of cheaper production and more profit.

1.5. Capitalism and zombified consumers

Mark Fisher (2009, p. 15) describes capitalism as both abstract and entirely dependent on people to function, he emphasizes this through the metaphor of capitalism being a zombie-maker. This dependency thus relies on people being complicit in the system, which can be achieved through many means. One of them is consumerism and the belief that there is a way to buy all the right products (Fisher 2009, p.15; Hutchinson & Monbiot 2024) instead of changing the system, even a critique of capitalism, it appears, cannot stand on its own and reinforces it (Fisher 2009, p.12). If we were to look at media critiquing capitalism, be it books or movies, it usually comes from none other than Hollywood and mass productions.

Hutchinson and Monbiot (2024, p.127) highlight the inherent self-reinforcing nature of capitalism, through its emphasis on individualism and profit, generating individualism and consumerism as a solution to all the problems that the system creates. A significant element of apocalyptic stories in general and their critique of capitalism, is the survivors surviving off of the past society with brands and objects littering the world, as a reminder of the past (Luckhurst 2015). In apocalyptic fiction, capitalism manifests itself through both reasoning of why apocalypses might have happened, but also in the background, in the post-apocalypse, through what was left behind and the monsters that might surround the protagonists in their struggle to survive, as a constant reminder of what they could have become. Just like the survivors cannot do anything else but try to survive, even if it means returning to scraps of the old world, so do the monsters lurking about. Critique of consumerism and the use of zombies as an allegory, are deeply linked.

There are several ways zombies can be reflections of capitalism and its effects, for instance, as Luckhurst (2015, p. 166) points out, through a portrayal of the system itself and its victims, reflecting the overall state of the world. He clarifies (Luckhurst 2015, p.183) that that zombies can be seen as a literalization of capitalist logic, through its exploitation of workers, “biopower”, as he refers to it. This can be expounded upon by the simple premise of supply and demand. Both the need for cheap labor and mass production works with overwhelming consumer demand (or anticipation of it, in order to gain profit) for products, resulting in mountains of landfills and sweatshops producing said objects for a cheaper price.

Graeber (2018, p. 201) even hints at creation of products, which are sold in order to fix a non-existing issue – “create demand, [either] by making people feel they are fat and ugly.”

Therefore, zombies reflect not only the possibility of the survivors’ own monstrousness in the face of the apocalypse, as a means to survive, but victimhood in the face of the crumbling system. Hughes (2021, p. 8) recounts the zombie as a cultural *memento mori*, providing insight into the meaninglessness of consumerism. After all, the sight of zombies in various media is primarily scary, but also sad in a way, they mindlessly follow a routine, becoming a tangible warning, leftovers of the culture these people lived in. They just follow a routine, unthinking, unfeeling.

Essentially, zombies not only reflect our own monstrosities back at us (survivors pitted against fellow people (or who used to be people) and clashing self-interests in the group), but reflect our anxieties, as well as general state. This can include fear of the other, spread of diseases and so on. It can also reflect a state of being, enhanced through fictional means. This likeness of workers to zombies has been broached in a variety of zombie fiction, from parodies to even non-fiction works.

1.6. Neoliberalism

According to De Cristofaro (2021, p. 133), neoliberalism, albeit difficult to define, marks the belief “in the economic and the political benefits of a self-regulating global market”. She goes on to describe several means to do so – economic deregulation, privatization and cuts to public spending and so on – likening it to spreading its “utopia” globally. In addition, Fisher highlights both capitalism and neoliberalism as a means of profit accumulation and not any sort of futurity neoliberalism might promise (Fisher 2009, p.29). Hutchinson & Monbiot (2024, p.3) on the other hand describe neoliberalism as an ideology that centers competition, reframing citizens as consumers, political power as economic power.

This kind of disempowerment follows into all aspects of life, especially work culture, as Hutchinson & Monbiot point out (2024, p.55), by centering the individual and freedom of choice in a broad pool of opportunities, in spite of the reality of unstable jobs, leaving people disillusioned and burned out.

Neoliberalism dreams of a utopia where wealth will trickle down to everyone, not only reinforce the grip that the system has on people in order to keep them forever hopeful

(Hutchinson & Monbiot 2024, p.3-5), but also the dangers and its connection to apocalyptic thinking. While neoliberalist utopias keep people hopeful, apocalyptic thinking, despite its vengeful connotations, just further reinforces the status quo, but with the roles reversed.

According to De Cristofaro (2021, p.157) apocalyptic fiction is the perfect outlet for neoliberalism (arguably, both its ideas and criticism of its flaws), through the protagonist's endless self-reinvention. While the survivors might seem to distance themselves from the old, the cities, the jobs, the consumerism, they still reflect the "present" (De Cristofaro 2021, p. 141-142) through their desperate attempts to try again, hoping the same thing will turn out different this time, as if the system (whether a neoliberal utopia or a rough pastoralist return to the old ways) was not flawed.

1.7. Briefly on Scandinavian work culture

In relation to work culture there is no one model that is universally accepted, despite this, the Scandinavian model is usually regarded as a sought after ideal, focusing on employee motivation (Gustavsen 2007, p. 652). Gustavsen (2007, p. 651-652) attributes this to two main differences: firstly, while a liberalist economy focuses on the market as an end all be all, a coordinated market economy provides a well needed buffer between the two that allows additional input, as opposed to leaving everything up to the market or relying on individualistic fixes that do not address the root of the problem.

Secondly, and this ties in with the first reason, the feeling of security. Gustavsen (2007, p. 651) highlights certain policies that strengthen this, such as active employment and worker welfare. However, none of these would be possible without cooperation (Gustavsen 2007, p. 657) that in turn strengthens the model. Additionally, this proves the interest in the worker, said policies not only directly address employees, as opposed to profits, but provide ground for them to be heard. Harper (2023) in turn, highlights small traditions that strengthen the bonds between colleagues, coffee breaks, fika, which provide a way to communicate outside of work bounds and lack of overtime. Seemingly small, but important respectful gestures which put "the person at the centre, rather than putting work at the centre" (Harper 2023, p.).

Grenness (2011, p. 334) highlights some broader key aspects of both Scandinavian and American work culture, immediately highlighting the concept of equality, extending from economic distribution of goods to social opportunities and experiences.

This immediately clashes with neoliberalist ideas of individualism (self-entrepreneurship) and efficiency, in addition to utopian ideals of one day working hard enough and earning enough wealth, as the focus is placed upon cooperation (Grenness 2011, p. 335), thus diminishing the need for strict hierarchies that entrepreneurs could move up towards higher rewards. Some of these aspects of scandinavian work culture include:

- emphasis on work-life balance (Grenness 2011, p. 340);
- cooperation (Grenness 2011, p. 342);
- respect for employees (Grenness 2011, p. 343)
- gender equality (Grenness 2011, p. 340);
- honesty, especially in cases of scandals or corruption (Grenness 2011, p. 341);
- focus on motivation and reward, as opposed to control (Grenness 2011, p. 341, he adds onto this by describing an endless loop of managers managing other managers, with workers being at the end of the hierarchy);
- slow decision making process (Grenness 2011, p. 342);
- lack of orientation focused strictly on results (Grenness 2011, p. 342);
- conflict-avoidance (Grenness 2011, p. 342);

However, even the Scandinavian model, while better on paper, cannot escape the neoliberalist society that it operates under. As Savage (2019) points out, while the Scandinavian model is known for its egalitarianism, the reality often does not match up with the popular image of championing women's rights and equality – citing problems of gender inequality the further one goes the career ladder and the ever present wage gap, influenced by more freedom of choice to pursue the wanted career as opposed to the one most sought after. If not towards one's public life at work, a push to broaden career perspectives, pressure still comes to one's private life. Even in a more lax Scandinavian work culture, there still exists a pressure for perceived efficiency, with the focus being shifted away from work, it turns into a panopticon of one's individual life (Savage 2019).

METHODOLOGY

“Severance” was chosen as the subject of this research for the novel’s portrayal of work culture and various other modern issues in relation to the zombie apocalypse. Arguably, the novel is a mix of both the post-apocalyptic and the office novel genres and contains elements of both. The genre mix itself strengthens the themes present in its more contemporary elements. This provides grounds for a unique mix of analysis, taking note of both aspects, in particular, instances where, for example, work culture and workers are referred to by/compared to post-apocalyptic terms or appear in post-apocalyptic scenarios, showcasing their effects and importance.

Research process focused on genre analysis in accordance with sociological analysis and elements of neoliberal critique highlighted in the novel through said elements. Firstly, relevant passages that contain or scrutinize specific architextual aspects were collected and analysed. Then they were divided into those concerning office novel architext and those concerning the post-apocalypse architext, in relation to the rapidly shifting world, mainly, the group of survivors Candace finds herself in; their dynamics and issues presented by the tropes used, and dynamics and events concerning the office, pre-apocalypse. These can be divided even further, coinciding with broader genre notions that I discussed in the Theoretical Framework portion of the paper (f.e. apocalyptic temporality). However, I will be analyzing their interconnectedness and portrayal in the novel through genres, as opposed to viewing them as purely separated elements of each genre.

Secondly, the distinction defined by Palmer (2021) and De Cristofaro (2021) was applied in analyzing how “Severance’s” mix of traits from both traditional and contemporary apocalyptic fiction was applied, criticizing the modern mundanity of life and work.

In the Theoretical Framework portion of the paper I outlined the genre of the office novel, as well as what Palmer (2021) and De Cristofaro (2021) regard as two main types of apocalyptic fiction (traditional, modern and contemporary), then elements of traditional and modern types of apocalyptic fiction. With said model of genre specific elements narrowed down, I analyzed “Severance” and its unique blending of more traditional elements against an undeniably modern backdrop.

EMPIRICAL PART

1. “Severance” and its structure in relation to its analysis

Ling Ma is a Chinese-American author, her 2018 novel “Severance” is her debut novel. It follows a young Chinese-American woman, Candace, recounting her past, her strained relationship with her mother, and working at a publishing company. All while a global pandemic breaks out and ends the world as we (or the protagonist) know it, left with mostly only shambling zombies and looted stores. Importance is placed on her childhood, private and work life in New York before the disaster – the outbreak of Shen Fever; and her life during the post-apocalypse portion of the story, having joined a ragtag group of survivors moving towards the leader’s promised saved haven – the Facility.

The novel consists of 26 chapters alternating between the past and the present, however it also includes atmospheric dream-like scenarios and hallucinations. The novel is filled with such temporality breaks, easily slipping into dreams and memories of the not too distant past, as Candace loses track of her identity and values in the oppressive survivors group and the crumbling Spectra company. Throughout the novel elements of both the post-apocalyptic and the office novel genre are intertwined and this is reflected in the novel’s structure.

“Severance” can be dealt into two broad parts, delving into separate distinct themes in each part. Firstly, the “past chapters” focus mainly on Candace and her life before she had to leave New York city. She details her past, focusing on her relationship with her parents who immigrated to America while she was a child (in particular, her lack of relationship with relatives in China, affected by her father’s ambitious career opportunity seeking and her strained relationship with her mother), as well as her various romantic relationships. Throughout all of this we get glimpses of her working at a publishing company Spectra, both before and after the apocalypse and how the uncaring bureaucracy and dismissive attitudes from the company influence Candace, the manufacturing workers from China she has to keep contact with and bend to the will of their clients in spite of acute health risks.

Secondly, the “present chapters”, which focus entirely on her time with the survivor group, traveling further away from the city, going on what they refer to as stalks. There, they gather supplies for their rebuilding of civilization, by looting stranger’s houses and killing the zombified people left inside, who are stuck performing the same actions as part of their routines over and over again. The tension felt in the group and its strict hierarchy builds over

the course of the narrative, exacerbated by the authoritative group leader Bob, who seems to have a detailed, specific vision for their future in his promised Facility with no regards for Candace or anyone's opinion.

2. Work culture and its criticism

Work culture and its critique is a key theme in "Severance". It might fall into the background in the "present", post-apocalypse chapters, but is never forgotten and, in my view, influences how Candace acts throughout the novel. It also coincides with the zombie metaphor as that of foreign workers mistreated and seen as cheap labour, forced to work in dangerous conditions for commodities such as a gemstone encrusted bible, but especially later on in the novel, with those left behind, blending in with the ruins. Work follows the survivors into the Facility, denying any sort of renewal or a new way of life, it follows Candace even into her dreams, where she continues working, explicitly torturing herself, making a hypothetical product, pondering alternatives without being asked to:

"I would calculate the cost of using Swiss Bible paper in place of the Chinese paper that the client insisted we buy, should the latter prove too flimsy[...]" (p.191)

This represents not only the pervasiveness of work encroaching upon all aspects of life, even dreams, but also its nature of endless trivial problem solving, unavoidable even in the apocalypse. For example, many of the 'present' chapters begin with Candace waking up and going to work, further framing the events in her life in a dichotomy of 'work' and 'not-work', but as previously mentioned 'work' is pervasive. This extends to the zombies in the post-apocalypse, who often repeat routines, one of which is their jobs, sending "errant messages [...] about previous projects that had been printed years ago." (p. 208).

This not only criticizes the neoliberal system that creates identical systems, but also how it perpetuates the same problems, creating solutions from the same base. In a way, Bob reprises the role of a manager for the survivor group throughout the novel's post-apocalypse sections, utilizing a hybrid of both punishment and motivation oriented models, he bends people to his will with his victory speeches and promises, maintaining a strict hierarchy to the very end and highlighting how, without this strictness present, the hierarchy would fall apart.

2.1. Mistreatment of workers

Perhaps crucially, the way “Severance” portrays the issue, is that while the workers are aware of what the companies they work at are doing, they are completely powerless to meaningfully change anything within the system without repercussions; “we offered even cheaper manufacture rates than individual publishers could achieve on their own, driving foreign labor costs down even further [...] despised what I did. Maybe I did too”(p.12). Over and over again Candace repeats to herself that she is just doing her job. This coincides with ideas of self-reinforcing nature of capitalism outlined by Hutchinson & Monbiot (2024), and Fisher (2009), mainly, that it is entirely dependent on complicit people.

This complicity is entirely unrewarded as the company does not care about its workers. At the start of the Shen Fever epidemic, great care was placed by Spectra’s CEO, Michael, to reassure existing workers at the cost of overseas manufacturers, at the time, facing the brunt of the tangible danger to their health. This disregard for human life in order to attain profit is a running theme in the novel.

This is expounded upon in a scene where Candace receives notice of a manufacturing issue with an upcoming product – the gemstone bible. She tries to negotiate with a company representative that hires Spectra to negotiate with suppliers in China, who grind and polish the gemstones vital to said bible. Candace’s explanation of the danger, the ongoing law-suit, and pleas to consider how “this is a matter of workers’ rights and safety falls on deaf ears. “The gemstone granules are tearing up their lungs” (p.24), she says and receives an empty platitude, a non-response, as if she was the one to cross an invisible boundary regarding work communications:

“A silence on the other end.

I mean, they’re dying, I clarified. The supplier is putting all its contract jobs on hold. Hello?

Finally she spoke, slowly and stiffly. I don’t want to sound like we don’t care, because we obviously do, but this is disappointing news” (p.24)

Despite corporations or their representatives putting on a front to seem as if they care for and value their employees, the end goal of profit and avoiding disappointed customers triumphs. Importance is placed not on the actual value of the object, let alone if its cost is worth it, but the market and its opinion: “There’s nothing else like the Gemstone Bible on the market, and we think a title like this is going to do very, very well.”(p.24). Perhaps the most

scathing critique comes in the form of a throwaway line Candace has, when Shen Fever's devastating effects become clear to all. Masks become not just an incentive for employee safety, providing a measly two units total, but a ploy to make money, "we could buy extra from HR for a cheaper, subsidized fee" (p.208). This reinforces the workers being reframed as just another type of consumers, just as Hutchinson & Monbiot (2024) emphasize, and how profit is sought after even from those directly affected by the pandemic.

"Severance" repeatedly shows how corporation's words are just empty words, not supported by their actions. At the height of the epidemic, Candace is informed that the majority of the workers are sent away to work remotely, management moving as well, only a select few left to be still working in the office in spite of Shen Fever. The safety and health of those workers is directly compromised in order to reassure clients, when competitors have allegedly already closed doors. The enticing offer is working as a communication's link with those working remotely, who seem to be a priority for the company. Instead of treating everyone equally, those deemed less important are offered a large sum of money to risk their lives for their job. The way it is presented is more of an extension of a favour, rather than something the company opportunistically does to save face, by leaving behind employees:

"We're willing to offer you this. She slid a packet of papers over. This summarizes the offer."
(p. 217)

The choice is just an illusion, Candace refusing would mean that she very likely would be fired, an incredibly risky and unstable situation to be during a wide scale epidemic. The text makes it clear that the sum could allow for Candace to live luxuriously, a larger apartment, taking maternity leave and more free time to afford her photography hobby; thinking of her and her child's future, she signs the contract with shaking hands.

The left behind employees find themselves stuck in the nearly abandoned building, as if rats in a cage, with no information coming from management or even those working remotely. In a particularly poignant scene, Candace describes how they are forced to view closed off areas through glass, left in pristine condition, awaiting the return of their rightful owners:

"We, the remaining employees, circled around in our smaller confines, bumping against locked rooms we weren't allowed to enter"(p.232)

Candace gets even more stuck in her work routine, waiting for work that will never come. While co-workers seem to be leaving one by one, she stays behind and busies herself with personal projects, still coming to the office everyday. Ironically, the big reward that Candace receives when her contract comes to term is completely useless to her in the ruins of New York city, filled with corpses, zombies, looted stores and rotting produce. The infrastructure itself gradually falls apart, the rot starts with trains being replaced by irregular shuttle buses, then by the gradually emptying streets and closed off stores, with nothing but security personnel visible.

Similarly, any tangible rewards provided by working become meaningless at the lack of balance between work and private life, “the death of leisure”(p.199) as it is referred to later on in the novel:

“[...]promotion after promotion, in part because he went into the office on the weekends too.
[...] He didn’t get to enjoy his life nearly enough.” (p.188)

Endless promises of rewards attempt at loyalty, but attain only a twisted version of it. The more loyal and dedicated the worker, the better the company’s profits. Candace’s defensiveness over being questioned for staying at the emptying building just proves that she has been ‘zombified’, coming to work everyday despite the danger of both Shen Fever and the quickly eroding city:

“I have a contract that stipulates I have to work in the office until a certain date, I explained
stiffly, defensively. [...]

Is there a building superintendent who still works in the building? Because if not, then you
really shouldn’t be in there. It’s not safe.

I’ll double-check on that, I said, though I knew there was no superintendent in the
building.”(p.251)

She creates excuses for the company, despite knowing that they, the employees left at the building, are completely abandoned, doing their job for the management, who disappeared after creating the contracts, absolving themselves of responsibility. She goes to extreme lengths to rationalize everything happening to her, even taking over thirty flights of stairs when the building’s elevator finally breaks, “It was my morning cardio” (p. 254). The system which allows people to lose themselves and all self-respect that they may possess, just so they could live a comfortable or at the very least decent life, is the same one that upholds these

systems in place and allows for people who should be held responsible to simply move away from the noise and the apocalypse. However, as “Severance” points out, no one is truly immune, no matter how much money they have or how far they go. Greedy capitalist practices inadvertently caused the fever breakout and accelerated its spread, and the system faces a complete breakdown by the end, its consumers a mass of shambling zombies.

2.2. Disposable workers

In addition, throughout the novel, at Spectra, it is hammered into Candace how disposable she is, even if subconsciously, through its atmosphere that is one of the main elements of an office novel. A worker's value begins and ends with their contributions to the team, directly from how many assignments they could take on, they are almost dehumanized. Most of such statements seem to come from Candace herself, as she simply observes her surroundings, signalling that she has internalized such ideas to an almost unconscious degree.

Later on, when Shen Fever is in full swing, Spectra starts to panic at workers understandably wanting to go home, filling for leaves of absence en masse or demanding to work remotely. The solution appears to be a work-offsite program:

“To be eligible, the employee had to fill out a questionnaire, containing twenty-seven questions that ominously hinted at his or her dispensability” (p. 215).

Hilariously, it reads as a job interview, further juxtaposing Michael’s, who is the CEO, and Carole’s, who is the Human Resources representative, speech during the meeting at the start of the novel, when news of Shen Fever just broke:

“[...] has not mandated work restrictions. But, as you know, your health is our first priority, and the company is taking precautions.” (p.20)

This change in attitude indicates that not only that the concern is highly performative, but that it depends on the actual level of threat imposed, less so to the workers and more so to production and profit, accumulation of which is key to neoliberalism (Fisher 2009) and crosses various logical and ethical boundaries. Those valuable to the company (“effective” workers and those deemed important, such as management) are swiftly whisked away in an arbitrary process of selection. The questionnaire required to join the offsite program consists

of various questions and a short paragraph to describe the worker's role at the company. They are required to pick their perceived effectiveness on a scale, from 'very effective' to 'very ineffective', to rate their own work quality. There is a second part to this process, the questionnaire is followed up by a live interview and then the worker is left to wait for an answer, "decision on his or her eligibility" (p. 215), meaning that one can go through the entirety of the selection and still get denied. This whole process showcases how the company does not care about their employees in the slightest, opting for a performative contest of sorts to see who is worthy enough to attain access to the work-off site program, based on completely arbitrary and inhumane factors, such as effectiveness or role, purposefully looking away from the dangers the epidemic might impose for those left behind.

2.3. The panopticon and work in the apocalypse

The panopticon is the architectural creation of Jeremy Bentham, a tower surrounded by cells, in it a watchman who can observe occupants without them knowing whether they are being watched or not (McMullan 2015). According to McMullan, the term is a widespread metaphor of surveillance, however, he notes Foucault to describe the panopticon "as a way to illustrate the proclivity of disciplinary societies to subjugate its citizens". The uncertainty of whether someone is watched or not, becomes an assumption that the watch is constant – "as a consequence, the inmate polices himself for fear of punishment" (McMullan 2015). McMullan extends the metaphor of the panopticon to include digital surveillance via CCTV, while Ling Ma in her novel "Severance" does not delve too deep into this phenomenon, she nevertheless notes aspects of it:

"He was long gone. In his place were extra security cameras, mounted in every corner of the lobby ceiling. Someone was still watching."(p.248)

Even in the apocalypse, when countless people have died and even more have already left the city, there is work to be done and new contracts are drafted to keep a few employees around just as part of the brand, to reassure the clients both that they are still operating and to look better compared to their competition. Said workers are described to be stuck like rats in a cage, reflecting the lack of any sort of consideration for these people from management or how they are supposed to get to work with the city becoming more and more inhospitable.

The workers left behind in Spectra reinforce a sort of panopticon of their own, the clearly absent management still present in their own minds:

“Our camaraderie was uneasy; everyone was keeping score. Like who would get to compile and send the weekly productivity reports to management, who arrived on time and who arrived late, who heeded corporate policy [...]”(p.232-233)

Even with no ‘warden’ present, the watchful eyes of fellow colleagues reinforce the previous work environment, as opposed to freeing everyone from it, because no one can conceptualize things being different. Without hierarchy, it is as if everyone assumes that it not only still exists, but that punishment awaits those who step out of line, their regular routine. Candace mirrors a conversation she had, when justifying production delays earlier on in the story, voicing concern about the workers’ health, this time, even after being left behind by the company she works for, she still tries to justify it in her mind, thinking about owing it to her contract, her client. After all, she is just doing her job.

2.4. Zombies as the victims and routine

Zombies in “Severance” are not only not a direct threat, they cannot infect people and do not feast on brains. More often than not they repeat the same tasks over and over again, found walking around in the same areas until their bodies decompose on their own. They do not seem cognizant or particularly conscious of what is happening around them, whether there are other people around or not; they feel no pain from their decomposing bodies and, vitally, are not aggressive towards humans.

“She raised her blue eyes and looked at me, as the sixth shot hit her in the cheek, and then the seventh reached the forehead. ”(p.71)

It is left ambiguous how humans can become infected, whether it is purely from fungal spores (a fungal infection, spreading from the lungs to the brain, p.148) or these particles lay dormant after inhalation, until they are triggered by a sense of nostalgia, as Candace theorizes. Nevertheless, the zombies featured in the novel are mostly half decayed corpses doing their daily tasks endlessly, unless the body is destroyed. Vitally, no one escapes a routine, not the young nor, especially the old, after a lifetime of routines. These tasks can vary wildly and are not dependent on thinking, more so, on the motorics ingrained into the mind of the person affected and the familiarity of the motion. For example, watching

television and switching between channels, setting the dinner table, trying on clothes, replying to emails, folding clothes, selling fruits, and even driving.

It seems to vary from person to person, even the actions themselves feature a modicum of variety, as Candace notes, triggered in some way by nostalgia. The importance of routine, as expressed through the zombies in “Severance”, is how much of ourselves we lose in the process of succumbing to these routines. Mindless actions, be it countless emails coming from work or domestic activities found in one’s private life (preparing food, setting plates, eating, saying grace), provide a harrowing look at what the last actions someone could ever take be, over and over again, before they decompose and die.

The zombies are humanized through their simple routines, portrayed in a sympathetic light, as victims, rather than as dangerous monsters. In return they further humanize Candace, who feels empathy towards them and even tries to hide a zombified girl from Bob and his crusade.

The zombies do not harm the survivors, but it is made clear that the survivors cause them more harm than they ever could cause in retaliation, if they were able to do so. Bob tries to justify killing the zombies by fear mongering the group with their number, “the force of the mob, of mob mentality [...] a hive mind.” (p.29), arguing that fiction is the only relevant frame for a fictitious world. However, as I have demonstrated in the Theoretical Framework chapter, many of such fiction based claims are not only inconsistent, but perpetuate the same racist or otherwise self-justifying narratives that copy one another. Just like “Severance” parodies, the survivors are justified in killing harmless zombies and looting their homes, an expression of neoliberalism (consuming products they find necessary to survive), except they are not and Candace openly questions this and the basis of Bob’s authority, but to no avail, due to no one wanting to be the first one to say anything, appear different from the group:

“They had to be skeptical too, but no one wanted to be the first to express their doubts.”(p.162)

The identity of a zombie is almost derogatory, as soon as one of the survivors becomes fevered, she immediately loses her supposed immunity from Shen Virus or any sort of privileges, she ceases being a person and returns to being a part of the mindless horde of zombies. The routine that zombified people perform with slight variations is not that dissimilar to the way “Severance” talks about work:

“Five years pass working for the same company [...] the same job, albeit under a new title and with an increased salary” (p.150)

And this is repeated throughout the novel, with slight changes, Candace’s routine remains the same, however the apocalypse seeps into her routine, subtly changing it. Despite this, she persists, as if zombified herself, in spite of the changes around her:

“I got up. I went to work in the morning. [...] noticed the sky looked different.” (p.191)

“I got up. I went to work in the morning. New York Fashion Week was still being held, but on a smaller scale.” (p. 211)

“I got up. I went to work in the morning. I got on the shuttle bus and looked out on the emptying streets, the unused subway tracks on the Williamsburg Bridge.” (p. 248)

“I got up. I went to work in the morning. It took forever to get there.” (p.254)

The only difference between the actually zombified people and those ‘zombified’ by work, such as Candace, is the lack of awareness, as opposed to willful ignorance or a distorted version of acceptance of their never ending situation. A morbid reflection of the amalgamation of our daily tasks and realities that affect us to the very core:

“[...] sequestered in his office for the full weekend, sitting at his computer, surrounded by coffee mugs. [...]a series of errant messages [...] about projects that had been printed years ago.”(p.208)

3. Elements of traditional apocalypse in “Severance” and how they are portrayed

“Severance” features elements of both traditional and modern post-apocalyptic stories. However, by the end of the novel it subverts almost all of them. As opposed to being saved by the survivor group and finding a new home in Bob’s promised New Jerusalem, Candace is in turn subjected to arbitrary punishments and as many rules as there were in her old life, is both literally and figuratively trapped and has her agency stripped away completely. Therefore, the new world, rather than full of possibility, becomes a prison for her in its rigid structure based on traditional apocalyptic fiction elements. Said elements work in tandem with aforementioned office novel elements and strengthen the overall themes of the novel.

The novel opens with an allusion to the Bible’s beginning verse, highlighting both the transformation from the old world into a new one, and the cementing of the novel’s relation to

and subversion of traditional apocalypse fiction elements – “After the End came the Beginning. (p.3)”

The focus of the chapters set in the present, following Candace and the survivors group, is placed on the main antagonist of the novel – the group leader Bob. He embodies all the worst parts of a traditional apocalypse fiction hero and serves a selfish and regressive force in the novel, seeking to entrap Candace in his vision of a new life leaving no room for the past or what he describes as the old versions of them. He sees it as their mission to rebuild civilization, viewing the group as chosen ones, immune from Shen Fever. Most importantly, chosen and guided by God, referencing divine mission often found in traditional post-apocalyptic fiction:

“You mean, like natural selection?
I’m talking about divine selection” (p.31)

From the very start of the novel he is presented as an older, confident all-knowing leader to a group of confused and scared administrative workers, HR specialists and lawyers, who “had to Google everything” (p. 3), hoping and planning on how to move on from the apocalypse that uprooted their lives in drastic ways for a long time before it started. This highlights how people can get stuck in work routines struggling to see anything outside of their field of view, in this case, their jobs and careers. What this sets up is that these people are confused, completely out of their zone of comfort, and therefore easy to manipulate, but also carries the same arbitrary hierarchies from the past, as discussed in the Theoretical Framework part detailing office novels, seeking a ‘manager’ in Bob – someone who would tell them what to do.

The hierarchy of the group is presented to us, before we even know what the apocalypse is, highlighting its importance and Candace’s role as an outlier. By the end she is the only one questioning Bob and his authority, yet at the beginning Candace partakes with the group. This could be explained by several factors: firstly, they are the only other healthy people left, or seem to be, and secondly, Candace seeks a community and connection after wandering New York alone for as long as she had, perhaps feeling regret at two previous missed opportunities to leave and connect with people (with her boyfriend and later on with her co-workers). Bob fills the role of a strict, but kind leader perfectly, to a cult-leader degree, demanding absolute obedience in return for “this is for your own good” and “we need to build our own community” speeches. Throughout the novel the group puts up with increasingly

authoritative and senseless demands, all in order to win the favor of the leader. Candace observes his power to manipulate early on in the novel (p.5), but perhaps overestimates it.

Bob's authoritative confidence in God and their group's mission reinforces his belief that they are doing important work in building their future in the apocalyptic wasteland:

“It isn't just looting. It is envisioning the future” (p.58)

The looting, or 'stalks' as they are referred to in the novel, follow a ritualized procedure that Bob reinforces through religion and religious acts, such as saying grace before each meal, extended to chants before a stalk, creating a tradition that the group members follow even in his absence:

“No, wait. Evan stopped her. Just wait. Let's do this right, like the other times”(p.121)

Notably, the process itself is highly gendered, dividing the group into traditional gender roles of hunters and gatherers. The men carry the guns and walk around the property looking for zombies, whom they herd into rooms and dispose of or clear out their bodies if they were already dead. The women are left to gather, each assigned their own objects to take. For example, one member gathered cooking supplies and shelf stable food, the other – medicine, bandaids and skin care products (as if that was a priority in the face of the apocalypse), clothes prioritizing either quality or expensive materials. Candace was in charge of looting entertainment, from books to game consoles. With this new activity of stalking replacing the survivors' old jobs as a new grimmer routine, the apocalypse becomes the new mundanity. In a way, this indicates that their strive to survive is based not only in desperation but wanting a better life for themselves from what they can gather in the ruins, and unknowingly reinforcing the same issues.

While “Severance” denies the hope present with the trope of utopia and revival of civilization, it provides an individualistic spin on it, by focusing on Candace escaping not only the old structures of the world (her stifling work environment that sees the employees as disposable profit machines), but the imposed upon her ideals of someone's utopia. There is hope to be found in “Severance” and it does not depend on the grace of God, moving to the countryside for safety or a group of survivors, it depends on Candace herself.

3.1. Pastoralism in “Severance”

Pastoralism is an important aspect in “Severance”. The novel begins by reinforcing pastoralism “fleeing New York for the safer pastures of the countryside” (p.3), interestingly it references the long history of pastoralist elements found in fiction and the repetition of it, by Candace lamenting that not only they were just repeating what they saw on television, things didn’t usually go as smoothly, as expected.

Many places are considered by the group before they settled on the facility, however the elements often named all had to do with nature and its potential for expansion: “rife with opportunities for canning root vegetables”, “structures that had survived fires and floods”. However, from a less practical perspective, focus was placed upon American locations, there was no overt discussion of the group trying to go abroad (for instance to a colder climate, where the Shen Fever is said to spread slower, the group remained fixed on traditions and ideals, such as “the most American of American cities”.

Coinciding with moving away from the city is the rejection of modernity, albeit in a very specific way, the group is shown to learn everything they could (from camping basics to how to do the Heimlich maneuver), they watched the internet stagnate as the infrastructures holding it together ceased to work. They retain self-confidence in spite of being entirely dependant on knowledge from the past:

“Anything that had been done before we could do better.”(p.6)

This overconfidence in their own abilities and supplies still available to them (for example fuel or food) proves the utopia they hoped for is short lived. Despite filling their base with as many looted objects as they can, to make it as comfortable as possible, it still is not enough. Similarly to how neoliberalism keeps people perpetually tethered and hopeful that things will change (Hutchinson & Monbiot (2024)); there’s always new projects and more supplies to find, the space is vast and it soon becomes difficult to conserve energy. “Bob is wary of overusing our supply of electric generators. I am only allowed to run the space heater at night” (p.225). The strict order of the way things need to be done that Bob imposes quickly becomes an oppressive force, making things worse and worse for the group in their already stressful and dire situation.

Another example of a similar commune Candace hears about from an acquaintance she makes when the epidemic has fully reached and enveloped New York. Asked why he had not gone out to join his brother in said commune, the man jokes:

“This place is home. What am I going to do at this point, go sailing in Martha’s Vineyard?”
(p.261)

What pastoralism and rejection of modernity undermines is the pervasiveness of systems (for instance workplace). Throughout the novel characters lament choices they could have made differently when talking about careers or complaining about work, while being stuck in work again, but this time the work is transformed. Through the lens of utopia, work in the Facility is expected to be at the very least inspiring (rebuilding of civilization), but it pertains to the same arbitrary rules and expectations. Unless predisposed to idealist pastoralism or its ideas (return to tradition, a simpler life etc.), not everyone could just leave everything they worked for and leave for a much harder and less stable life in the countryside with a group of strangers, even in the case of an apocalypse. The novel ends on an explicitly anti-pastoralist note, with Candace returning to the city, however not New York where she started her journey, but Chicago. Returning to a simpler time, a naive personal nostalgia in the novel is replaced by Candace’s fond memories of her boyfriend, who spoke of Chicago as his home. Intent is more important than idealistic beliefs. Additionally, modernity is not vilified in the novel, rather hypocrisy is – surface level rejection of past systems, while still participating and benefiting them (‘stalks’, looting is explicitly tied with consumerism, which I discuss in more detail in its own section). A forced version of pastoralism, reinforced through manipulation and desperation is just not viable or safe for anyone.

3.2. Authority and agency

Candace’s and more broadly the survivor group’s lack of agency is highlighted throughout the novel and is juxtaposed with the freedom they are first promised to achieve in the pastoralist utopia that the Facility is described as, an escape from the rigid structures of their old lives, in particular the strict monotony of everyday work. This directly rejects the belief of utopia that the new order is inherently better, because as it soon becomes evident, nothing was learned from the past except that manipulation is an effective tactic.

Bob maintains his authority over the group and expresses it through not only his speech, but also his appearance and mannerisms, unflinching and appearing purposefully put together.

“I have never seen Bob in a T-shirt, actually. He takes care not to dress casually around us.”(p.281)

His social image is another important aspect, opening up to Candace about the Facility’s importance to him, he swiftly changes his attitude when interrupted, meaning that his group leader persona is highly performative. Additionally, it mirrors the age based hierarchies often found in workplaces, especially through the eyes of newly hired people. Candace is the last one to join the group and often feels left out socially. This signifies not only Bob’s rise to power being completely arbitrary, but reinforces that his dream of utopia is flawed and detached from wishes of others, since they are not his equals.

The extent of loss of agency is all-consuming. Bob not only appoints daily tasks for everyone, but carries on him all the keys to their vehicles, thus dictating when and where they can leave (running away from the Facility as a whole is out of the question). He even dictates how others interact with Candace, at one point ordering them not to speak with her altogether. There can be seen acts of small rebellion from her friend, who despite not speaking, still reaches out to her in kind gestures (such giving her hand warmers, or reminding her to take her supplements as opposed to literally forcing her).

“I can’t have you leaving. [...] We’ll take care of you, provide for you. You’ll carry your baby to term. [...] For the duration of this confinement, you should work on showing me you can follow the rules.” (p.167-168)

Later on in the story, a hallucination of Candace’s mother even warns her that her identity has been compromised and that she needs to act before it is too late:

“Listen to what you’re saying. As long as you’re pregnant. [...] Do you think you’ll even have the chance to escape after that?”(p.243)

This indicates the selfishness of Bob, through his actions and words he demonstrates that the group of survivors can only be trusted so much, and at any disobedience, their privileges (or personhood) is removed. At first, Candace hides her pregnancy from most of the group. A fellow member suggests she use the traditional trope of ‘miracle baby’ for her own benefit, since Bob will “probably read some symbolic meaning into it, see it as an auspicious sign for our future” (p.144). However, said member betrays her and the trope completely backfires on Candace. Arguably, upon the reveal of her pregnancy, Candace loses all rights as a person and the remainder of her agency, a possibility of a reward dangled before her, as if

personhood is to be earned as a reward for good, or rather, acceptable behavior. The Facility becomes Candace's own hellish nightmare, as she is locked away and forcefully cared for her and her future child. This stripping of rights, perhaps even infantilization, as if Candace was suddenly unable to think for herself, can be tied to how corporations view pregnancy in contemporary society. Candace loses her rights as a 'survivor/worker' of the Facility and becomes 'a mother'.

The aforementioned reward is the return of agency, but even then Bob is not only selective, but rations it according to the behavior of the subject. In addition, this manipulation tactic is masterfully orchestrated to keep up the both the loyalty of the subject and the hope that things might change, mirroring how neoliberalism maintains the system and strings people along, by promising a better tomorrow to all, one day the hard-worker will earn their promotion:

“Leading up to the birth of your child, we will return these privileges one by one. Today, we’ve allowed you to join us.” (p.230)

This controlling behaviour is present and slowly escalates throughout the novel. Bob goes as far as deciding for other survivors that it is best to leave their old lives behind in favor of the new one. Similarly to how Fisher laments capitalist realism (and arguably, as discussed in the Theoretical framework part, neoliberalism) projects a lack of other options, in a subtly dread-inducing scene, he presents Candace her old phone back. The scene plays out as if it were a gift, Bob even presenting it in a bible, noticing her interest in them, but the words reveal the meaning:

“Let it serve as a reminder of your former self, an artifact from long ago. I truly believe a person should be reconciled with their past before they can move forward into the future.[...]

It is a symbol of how far you’ve come”(p.113).

It is not only broken, as Adam, another member of the group reveals, they purposefully broke the phone in order to sever Candace's ties to her old life, presenting the new life that Bob wants, as the only possible option, thus, negating her choice of something as simple as viewing old photos she had saved on the phone or other sentimentally valuable things. The foundation of the new life that Bob offers to them is so shaky, so as to be threatened by anything and everything that could serve as any means of alternative or, more importantly, highlighting that it is just repurposed old social structures, meant to be seen as the right way, a novelty.

Not only can the group not decide for themselves, as if they were children, according to Bob the outside world, for example the internet, corrupts them, “We are more free to live in the present, and more free to envision our future” (p.115). He contradicts himself consistently. The only reason they are able survive is thanks to objects and produce they loot and the promised Facility they move towards is of highly sentimental value to Bob himself, having grown up in the area. However, others in the group are not allowed such sentimentalities. When Candace and a few members of the group breaks the rules by returning to one of their old homes, where she subsequently becomes fevered, he berates Candace:

“[...] don’t think that I’m not sympathetic to what you’re going through. But also [...] don’t think that what happened in there, what we were forced to do, wasn’t a direct consequence of what you two did last night”(p.146)

The problem of lack of agency extends to Candace’s workplace. She recounts trying to resign and being told to ‘be sure’:

“[...]I felt insecure in my decision. Trying to talk myself out of my job felt like trying to justify an extravagant purchase I couldn’t actually afford. ”(p.275)

This line not only highlights how her choice was minimized, but the system in which Spectra and the broader understanding of society operates, allows no room for such decisions. As if Candace has no say in the matter and must simply push through the difficulties of her job.

3.3 Justifications of violence against zombies

The survivor group’s actions and attitudes towards zombies are indicative of several reasons. One of them is the ‘us vs them’ mentality, which Bob uses as a mechanism to further tie the survivor group together, as if they were the only ones they could rely upon. The zombies also play a part in the self-justifications that Bob brainwashes the group with, in trying to make them believe that they are special and the ones worthy of a New Jerusalem (the Facility) and their actions are noble and kind, doing what is necessary.

Contrasting this, they break into other people’s houses and take everything they will need to upgrade this safe haven, from useful things such as batteries, generators and flashlights, to food and entertainment (books, DVDs and so on). They are entirely dependent

on these stalks, be it at people's homes or nearby stores, any sort of self-sufficiency away from society is still a faraway dream. The 'them vs us' mentality is made abundantly clear when one of the members of the group itself becomes fevered. He frames it as Candace forcing his hand, killing the fevered former group member just an extension of kindness, stopping the loop.

Another reason is the need to deny guilt. By justifying that the killings were necessary, Bob and the group excuse the means for the end result, but adding on a layer of "release" and "it's the humane thing to do" (p.70) it becomes an ego boost, an explanation for why it is necessary, a mission. A group of survivors heroically 'releasing' victims from their eternal torment of repetition and stalking their homes to take away belongings, necessary to build their private New Jerusalem, also sounds much better on paper than the killing of previously human undead who pose no threat to mentally ease looting for the perpetrators. On the other hand, this shows a twisted sort of empathy from the other survivors, perhaps seeing themselves in these zombies, if not what they could have become, then who they were before.

4. Consumerist culture rotting in the background

Consumerism in the novel is signified through abundance. While not being as directly addressed in the novel, as other themes, it coincides with many of them (from mistreated workers to the idea of utopia based on the past). It is always in the background pre- and post-apocalypse.

Ling Ma's tendency to describe places not through their surroundings or nature per say, but through famous landmarks and objects/brands, signifies their power in numbers to shift focus away from everything else and highlights how these objects and aspects of consumerism persist even in the apocalypse:

"On my right side, the land is riddled with corporate parks, auto-parts stores, new housing developments with colonial-style homes, public storage compounds, a Benihana, pancake houses, crab shacks."(p.284)

Early on in the story New York is defined by its art exhibits, retail stores and consumers standing in huge lines for the latest trending thing. This foregrounds the vanity and shifts of the consumerist culture, without anything actually changing, one trend is replaced by the next. However, this sense of hopelessness to see any sort of change follows Candace into

the perceived future as well, she laments “I’d be priced out of every borough in another decade”(p.13). While the ‘if things continue this way’ is implied, the apocalypse swiftly changes things for a different kind of worse, yet the ruins of consumerism remain.

Consumerism is expressed even through the Bibles Candace makes, like any product, iterations of which follow the same pattern over and over again respond to their demand in wildly more extravagant or specific forms (such as the travel bible or the aforementioned luxurious Gemstone Bible), embodying “the purest form of product packaging” (p.23). Just like every aspect of the cities or places mentioned in the novel are affected by the consumerist objects or brands surrounding them, so are religious practices also affected by consumerism. Candace visiting a foreign city, after a shopping spree, notices a stand which sells various objects meant for the dead. Noticing the spirit bills, she ends up feeling guilty and chooses to buy some to burn for her parents to carry into the afterlife. “Severance” subtly highlights how even traditions are influenced by consumerism, as it is possible to buy a variety of not only currencies, but even cardboard objects denoting various items, such as cell phones and even Mercedes convertibles. It is debatable whether such abundance signals purely her guilty consciousness, or is meant as a reflection of changing times, where one can buy a diamond necklace or a car for their deceased relatives. Nevertheless, working with what she has, Candace sends her parents objects she think they would like and appreciate, such as books, fleece jackets, items from brands her mother loved and her favorite shrimp cocktail, bringing the empty consumerism a well needed personal touch.

Consumerism is inexplicably tied with routines portrayed in the novel. Advertisements for a variety of products follow people into their subconscious brain, as can be seen in the scene where Candace attempts to help an older woman, unbeknownst to her, who is fevered:

“T-Mobile was offering a new no-strings-attached carrier plan. She laughed. Neutrogena Blackhead Eliminating Cleanser, blasting blackheads all over your face. She laughed. The new Lincoln Town Car. French’s mustard. The latest MacBook. She laughed.”(p.156)

The way there are still zombified workers, pushing rotten produce and folding the same clothes over and over again, stuck in the work that consumed so many hours of their lives, now consuming their bodies. Just as they keep their premises appealing to customers, so are the consumers eager to consume. The two not only coexist but in a way encourage one another:

“There was the old lady in her nightgown, pushing her food cart back and forth in front of the Gristedes”(p.258)

Globalism ties all the themes of the novel together, reinforcing their interconnectedness. Shen Fever is rumored to have reached the USA through a shipment of goods, further spreading through coastal areas, through trade and imports. If the consumer culture were different, perhaps countries would not look for cheap labour abroad, the overworked workers would have not worked in dangerous conditions or started the epidemic in China and employees would be valued and not used to generate even more profit.

While “Severance” openly admits to there being no escape from the realities of this world (p.276) it retains its sense of hope through pages of scathing critique and bleak reality that seeps into the post-apocalypse. Through a blend of familiar apocalyptic tropes and their modern subversions, Ling Ma’s “Severance” is a poignant call to pay more attention to our our mundane lives, private life, work, and especially their balance:

“[...] to take part in and to propagate its impossible systems. [...] To go to work in the morning. It is also to take pleasure in those systems because, otherwise, who could repeat the same routines, year in, year out?” (p.290)

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, “Severance” being a blend of two genres (modern post-apocalyptic and office novel), influences not only its approach to the portrayal of issues such as work culture in a capitalist society and its influence on employees, but in turn addresses a variety of other interconnected issues. Most importantly, the novel highlights how old structures reinforce the same problems, such as mass consumerism, lack of agency, and sexism. Office novel elements being featured in a post-apocalyptic novel helps the reader understand how pressing these issues really are and that they will only get worse if left unaddressed. Workers pushed to work more efficiently feel hopeless and stuck in their careers, systems that they live in, and become ‘zombified’. Additionally, it addresses change in genre bounds itself, highlighting how a thorough analysis blends genre bounds (f.e. traditional and contemporary post-apocalyptic) and what important, additional meaning can be gained from a genre analysis.

Post-apocalyptic genre influences the approach to various sociological issues. The protagonist follows routines and continues going to work in the midst of a pandemic in the same way a zombie would. This draws attention to her lack of agency, the juxtaposition of it in the modern neoliberalist society, but also the post-apocalypse one, drawing comparison between the two. The mix of genres, post-apocalyptic and that of the office novel, also allows for extremes in portrayal that acutely point to the sources of said issues, such as profit driven absent management or mental stress suffered by employees.

The novel reflects modern anxieties through recurring segments and routines that highlight how ingrained into our lives things such as replying to dozens of emails a day are, and how they influence us by zombifying from our subconscious. Through its post-apocalyptic genre terms and conventions the novel calls attention to mindless escapist violence and the self-justifications such narratives are rife with (from divine guidance, to empty platitudes of perceived threat). Escapist utopia, away from mundanities and tedium that modern life overwhelms with, proves to be a hellish nightmare. By centering a righteous and zealous ‘traditional apocalyptic fiction’ protagonist as its antagonist, “Severance” criticizes the notion that the old world can simply be done with and that the new order and new creation of civilization overwrites all. Through manipulation and coercion, the utopia becomes even more distorted and threatens Candace, both through oppression and its rigid order that mirrors the same hierarchical structures from the old society, with new ‘managers’.

While “Severance” is a modern post-apocalyptic novel and highlights the nihilism present in the passivity of its protagonist, it retains its hopefulness with Candace’s empathy, individual choices and kindness throughout the narrative, which highlights how flawed being complicit is. At the end of the novel Candace remains, presumably, the sole non-infected survivor, escaping her workplace and the survivors’ cult. Throughout Candace’s experiences and actions, “Severance” invites the reader to consider their own situation, the systems and routines we all live in and, most importantly, how we see ourselves in these systems and how they affect us. The novel offers a way to resist, to be more mindful in spite of it all and highlights the importance of not falling for the old reframed as something new. “Severance” invites the readers to find the courage to decide for ourselves, starting with our routines, which center our lives. We do not yet live in an apocalypse and have the possibility to change the status quo.

SUMMARY

The subject of this research paper is the portrayal of work culture in relation to apocalyptic elements found in Ling Ma's novel "Severance", a modern post-apocalyptic novel and its hybrid office novel genre. The aim is to analyze how genres highlight work life issues. Specifically, how work culture is portrayed in a post-apocalyptic novel, reflecting a capitalist system and its effects, through a blend of genres (post-apocalyptic and the office novel), while being grounded in reality.

Post-apocalyptic stories can provide a comfort in their escapist narratives away from neoliberalism systems and their problems, perhaps in spite of the apocalypse in question, and its elements reinforce this belief: dichotomy that upholds the survivors as ones chosen, as well as rejections of modernity and return to nature, the mistake in trying to uphold old structures, which were the ones to fail in the apocalypse and/or misguided idealism in thinking the status quo is good enough. In spite of modern apocalypse fiction iterations being more nihilistic than their traditional counterparts, some form of hope or at the very least wake-up call is retained and reinforces the themes present.

"Severance" being a blend of two genres (modern post-apocalyptic and office novel), influences not only its approach to the portrayal of issues such as work culture in a capitalist society and its influence on employees, but in turn addresses a variety of other interconnected issues. Most importantly, the novel highlights how old structures reinforce the same problems, such as mass consumerism, agency, and sexism. Office novel elements being featured in a post-apocalyptic novel helps the reader understand how pressing these issues really are and that they will only get worse if left unaddressed.

Darbo tema - darbo kultūros vaizdavimas siejant su apokaliptiniais elementais, pastebimais Ling Ma romane „Severance“, šiuolaikiniame postapokaliptiniame romane ir jo žanre-hibride - biuro romane. Darbo tikslas išanalizuoti, kaip žanrai išryškina profesinio gyvenimo problemas. Kaip postapokaliptiniame romane, atspindinčiame kapitalistinę sistemą ir jos padarinius, vaizduojama darbo kultūra, pasitelkiant žanrų (postapokaliptinio ir biuro romano) derinį bei remiantis realybe.

Postapokaliptinės istorijos gali suteikti paguodos, padėti pabėgti nuo neoliberalizmo ir šios sistemos problemų, nepaisant pačios apokalipsės, kurios elementai sustiprina tai: dichotomija, pabrėžianti, kad išgyvenusieji - išrinktieji, modernybės atmetimas ir grįžimas į gamtą, klaidingas bandymas palaikyti senąsias struktūras ir (arba) idealizuojama esama

situacija. Nepaisant to, kad šiuolaikinė apokaliptinė literatūra yra labiau nihilistinė, nei tradicinė postapokaliptinė literatūra, išlieka tam tikra viltis ar bent jau raginimas pabusti, kuris sustiprina esamas temas.

„Severance“ derinami du žanrai (postapokalipsės bei biuro romano), tai paveikia darbo kultūros kapitalistinėje visuomenėje bei jos įtakos darbuotojams vaizdavimą, taip pat kaip romane nagrinėjamos kitos susijusios problemos. Svarbiausia tai, kad romanas pabrėžia, kaip senosios struktūros stiprina tas pačias problemas, tokias kaip masinis vartotojiškumas, savarankiškumo stoka ir seksizmas. Biuro romano elementai, kurie pastebimi postapokaliptiniame romane, padeda skaitytojui suvokti problemų svarbą ir, kad situacija tik blogės, jei nebus imamasi veiksmų.

Temaet er fremstillingen av arbeidskultur i forhold til apokalyptiske elementer i Ling Mas roman "Severance", en moderne postapokalyptisk roman og dens hybride kontorromansjangeren. Målet er å analysere hvordan sjangeren understreker arbeidslivsspørsmål. Hvordan arbeidskulturen ser ut i en postapokalyptisk roman, som framstiller et kapitalistisk system og dets konsekvenser, gjennom en blanding av sjanger (postapokalyptikken og kontorromanen), som støtter seg til virkeligheten.

Postapokalyptiske fortellinger kan gi en mager trøst i sine eskapistiske narrativer, flykte fra nyliberalistiske systemer og deres problemer, kanskje til tross for apokalypsen, dens elementer forsterker følelsen: dikotomien som opprettholder de overlevende som de utvalgte, forkastelsen av moderniteten og retur til naturen, feilen i forsøk å opprettholde gamle strukturer, som var de som mislyktes i apokalypsen og/eller misforstått idealisme i å tro at status quo er godt nok. Uansett av at moderne apokalypselitteratur er mer nihilistisk enn tradisjonell apokalypselitteratur, finnes det en form av håp eller i det minste en slags vekker som forsterker de eksisterende tematikkene.

"Severance" er en blanding av to sjanger (moderne postapokalyptisk roman og kontorroman), noe som ikke bare påvirker hvordan temaer som arbeidskulturen i et kapitalistisk samfunn og innflytelse på de ansatte beskrives, men hvordan romanen tar opp en rekke andre sammenkoblede problemer. Først og fremst understreker romanen hvordan gamle strukturer forsterker de samme problemene, som overforbruk, tap av selvstendighet og sexisme. Det at kontorromanens elementer inngår i en postapokalyptisk roman, hjelper leseren til å forstå hvor presserende disse problemene egentlig er, og at situasjonen bare vil bli verre om det ikke finnes løsninger.

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