

The End as Enjambment: Critical Inquiries Beyond the End...

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ABSTRACT: This introduction investigates the proliferation of ends in late 20th century and early 21st century fiction, theory, and culture. By investigating some characteristics of ‘ends’ I reflect upon some of the aporias of the concept of the end. I conclude by analyzing Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2013) for its discussion of the end of the world and the end of race and show that the novel conceives of a critical form of post-apocalypticism in a racialized context.

KEYWORDS: End; Postmodernism; Post-Apocalypse; Colson Whitehead.

I don't believe in the discourse of the end.

Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought* 143.

The predication of an “end” is an enjambment that prohibits resolution

when one is unaware of how to proceed on to the next step.

Alain Badiou, ‘On a finally objectless Subject’. 24.

Sensing the End

What is America’s relation to ends? In this introduction, I argue that just the idea of ‘America’ has always relied upon the possibility of a (new) beginning, so too has it depended upon the imagination of ends, which also holds for the logic of beginnings and ends in general: we cannot think the one without the other. There is no absolute beginning, just as there is no absolute end. While the discovery of the continent was quickly stylized as a clean slate, this inherently *modern* beginning was always already overshadowed by the sense of an end.¹ Seeing the ‘end’ as a mere ideological device needed to be able to proclaim a new

¹ Peter Freese points to this inherent connection between the idea of a beginning and an end in American apocalypticism: the “truly apocalyptic is never interested in the end only but always searches

beginning has, however, not only played a seminal role for America's identity as a nation, but has also provided fertile soil for the proliferation of discourses of the end as such. Indeed, particularly in the United States, the inflationary declaration of 'ends' has led, I would argue, to a decrease in its emphatic value. And it is especially the humanities that has been afflicted by this "discourse of the end" (*Infinite* 143) as contemporary philosopher Alain Badiou observes, what Jacques Derrida before him has already aptly described as an "apocalyptic tone."²

In the last decades of the 20th century, we have thus witnessed a variety of death-tolls that reach from political systems to philosophical concepts to aesthetic forms. In his seminal book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, published nine years before the second millennium comes to a close—albeit already published as an essay five years earlier—Fredric Jameson begins with the observation: "The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the 'crisis' of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.)" (1). And the list, as Jameson fittingly intimates in the pleonastic doubling of the "etc.", is by no means exhaustive. To the 'end of man' and the 'end of history,' the new millennium (that "dreaded Y2K," as Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* phrases it (302), that was no end after

for a new beginning" (17). He goes on to show that particularly the Puritanical founding fathers saw an inherent interconnection between the New World and an apocalyptic clean slate (24ff.). Lois Parkinson Zamora observes that Columbus "immediately initiated what was to become a perennial imaginative association of America with the promise of apocalyptic historical renewal" (7). Freese also notes that "[i]n his letter to Doña Juana de la Torre, Columbus quotes from Isaiah and Revelation, and in his compendium of scriptural and other excerpts he sees his explorations as ushering in a more perfect age" (23). Particularly through a Puritanical belief in the New World as more than merely a geographical clean slate, Freese argues that "from its very beginning, American culture was deeply concerned with 'the end'" (24).

² See Jacques Derrida's *Apokalypse*, which includes the essays: "Von einem neuerdings erhobenen apokalyptischen Ton in der Philosophie" as well as "No Apocalypse, not now." Particularly the latter inquires into the rejuvenation of apocalypticism in America at the end of the twentieth century (*Apokalypse* 91).

all) has added additional ends: 9/11's "end of irony," Kenneth Warren's "end of African American literature," or the various "ends of postmodernism," to name a few.³

Given this plethora of heterogeneous ends, this introduction to the end considers what Jameson, in a conscious or unconscious reference to Frank Kermode's seminal book, calls "senses of the end." This highly equivocal formulation in fact presents a cogent starting point that enables us to understand some of the modalities of ends and furthermore paves the way for what this special issue frames as "ends as enjambments."

In one respect, Jameson's formulation of "senses of the end" is noteworthy, since it modulates Kermode's concept of 'the sense of an ending'. From a mere quantitative, or grammatical perspective, Jameson notes the pluralization of "senses" of the end. If his phrasing thus seems to take stock of late capitalist eschatologies, it is worth pointing out that what proliferates are not 'ends' but merely the "senses" of one singular end. It goes beyond the scope of this introduction to inquire as to whether this constellation of ends may be subsumed under a larger umbrella term—an anthropological constant, for instance—that is grounded in our existential situation as mortal beings.⁴ In other words: are there multiple ends or are they part of a grander, all-too-human structure? Are all of these ends merely based on our human fear of or desire for death?

Furthermore, the expression of 'sensing the end' also addresses epistemological and phenomenological questions: how can one actually *sense* an end? Can one see it? Smell it? Feel it, just as Tyrone Slothrop becomes sexually aroused right before a V-2 rocket strikes in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*? How can I know that an end has occurred? While neither Kermode nor Jameson likely had these questions in mind, the end, and its experience, processing, and/or representation, posit seminal *aporias* that are implicit in the very logic of every end. This problem is best formulated by Derrida when he notes that "one

³ See Roger Rosenblatt's article in *Time Magazine* "The Age Of Irony Comes To An End"; Kenneth Warren's *What was African American Literature?*; Stephen J. Burn's *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*; Mary K. Holland's *Succeeding Postmodernism*; or Raoul Eshelman's *Performatism, or, the End of Postmodernism*.

⁴ In his magisterial *Debt*, David Graeber makes an interesting argument in relation to the apocalyptic sense of an imminent end, which he sees as inherently related to capitalism (351 ff).

does not leave the epoch whose closure one can outline” (*Of Grammatology* 12). What is implied by this are the logical and argumentative problems that every form of ‘posterization,’ as Paul C. Taylor dubs it in the context of post-black aesthetics (626), has to face.⁵ The inherent epistemological dilemma that ends evoke can thus be seen as coming from two directions: on the one hand, they beg the question of how to anticipate an end; on the other, one might wonder about how to relate to an end after it has occurred.

The former problem is perhaps best grasped through examining eco-apocalypse, a recent derivative of the discourse of the apocalypse (about which Jessica MacQueen and Sebastian Thede will write more elaborately in this special issue). Even though apocalypse seems to rely fundamentally on a teleological notion of time, apocalypticism as a cultural strategy functions, as I would argue, in circular motions. While there is no question that Judeo-Christian temporality is different from circular philosophies in Asian and Hellenistic areas,⁶ the actual mechanisms of apocalyptic practices are anything but linear. Just like Puritanical millennial jeremiads,⁷ ecological apocalypse also positions an ultimate *eschaton*; however, this proleptic imagination (Garrard 86) only serves to effect change in the present. Greg Garrard notes in this respect that “[e]nvironmental apocalypticism, on this view, is not about anticipating the end of the world, but about attempting to avert it by persuasive means” (107-108). For Garrard, “apocalypticism” is thus not only a fundamentally rhetorical (and political) discourse, but it is also “inevitably bound up with imagination, because it has yet to come into being” (94). In very much the same way as utopian and dystopian novels, apocalyptic narratives functionalize its prophetic imagination in order to ‘exhort’ (Garrard 108). Instead of a clear linear trajectory that is directed towards a specific *telos*, the

⁵ In his essay “Post-Black, Old-Black,” Taylor notes that “Post-soul faces similar problems as postmodernism and postcolonialism” (630-631). According to him, the beginning of the ‘post-black’ or ‘post-soul’ is to be situated after the end of the Civil Rights movement which marked the “decline of soul culture, reflected in popular music and film, again in part, by the rise of an urban-inflected, hyper-materialistic nihilism and the fall of a rural-inflected, gospel-tinged optimism” (625).

⁶ See Garrard (93 ff.) or Thompson (3 ff.).

⁷ Lawrence Buell remarks upon this circular structure when writing that “[w]e create images of doom to avert doom: that is the strategy of the jeremiad,” while he is not certain “[w]hether the same logic applies to the rhetoric of environmental apocalypse” (295).

structure of apocalyptic rhetoric is therefore only interested in the future in order to reflect back onto the present, or as Cathy Gutierrez observes: “Like narrative, millennial systems use the promise of closure as the focusing lens of the present. Closure is anticipated as the end point that will retrospectively make sense of the past and present” (47).

The difference between eco-apocalypse and religious apocalypse, one could argue, is that although both want to get the sheep back in line in the present, ecological apocalypse undermines temporal linearity by putting a positive accent on the time before the apocalypse has happened. If religious apocalypse cherishes the coming of the End Time for its promise of redemption, “less feared as an ultimate end than expected as a new beginning” (Freese 25), ecological apocalypse represents the past in an often idealized, nostalgic manner—a ‘Nature’ that needs protection if its Fall is to be averted. Eco-apocalypse thus not only projects a future in order to inspire changes in the present; it all too often conjures a dystopian future in order to romanticize the past (and conserve the present).

The second conceptual plight of ends—of how to relate to bygone ends—may thus also be viewed in the more recent proliferation of post-apocalyptic narratives. Just as the excessive call for various ‘ends’ in the humanities has lowered the threshold of such declarations, so, I would insist, has the increase in last-man-settings (and it is almost exclusively last men) engendered an unemphatic and uncritical use of the term ‘post-apocalypse.’ This probably goes hand in hand with a general semantic extension of the term ‘apocalypse,’ as Freese notes. This semantic shift towards primarily destructive connotations of the term is palpable not only due to Hollywood movies that deploy the “meaning of ‘apocalyptic’ as a mere synonym for ‘catastrophic,’ ‘cataclysmic’ or ‘disastrous’” (27), which seems too superficial for Freese.⁸

⁸ While apocalypse is, for instance, already described in the negative sense in Michael Wigglesworth’s longpoem *The Day of Doom* (1662) when it says: “Till God began to pour/ Destruction the world upon/ In a tempestuous shower” (l.21-24), it still retains the “essential tension between old and new, destruction and renewal, threat and promise” (Freese 27).

Analogous to this one may witness how the term ‘post-apocalyptic’ is typically used in a temporal sense that is short-hand for: after the end. However, it seems to me that by letting the term go through the same conceptual developments that ‘post-colonialism’ or ‘post-modernism’ have undergone, one might arrive at a more reflective and complex understanding of this seminal discourse of the late 20th and early 21st century. What I mean by this is that a proper idea of the post-apocalyptic might go beyond the merely temporal dimension of the ‘post’ (as in the all-too-narrow understanding of post-colonialism referring to the time *after* colonialism) and fully develop a more critical relation that the prefix entails. Just as recognizing that the ‘post’ in post-modernism does not merely address the historical era that comes *after* modernism, so does a complex grasp of post-apocalypse equally necessitate a thorough engagement with the (religious) discourse of apocalypse. Here, I want to turn to Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011) to show how the novel reflects upon ‘post-apocalyptic’ genre conventions in order to self-consciously reflect upon and criticize this genre as well as the politics it sustains.

Upon first glance, *Zone One* comes across as your typical zombie novel. All around the globe an unexplained pandemic has triggered the mutation of people into two groups of zombies: the flesh-devouring “standard-issue skels” and the lethargic “stragglers” (48), which typically loiter around without attacking the surviving humans. The eponymous ‘Zone One’ is situated in lower Manhattan, where the governmental leftovers reassembled in Buffalo, of all places, have decreed to wipe this particular area clean by dispelling the infected: “gentrification had resumed” (29). While the novel’s setting clearly fulfills the temporal dimension of taking place ‘after’ an obscure happening has occurred, it also comments on the discourse of post-apocalypse in a highly metafictional manner, which one can already glimpse by the ironical phrasing that relates to a sociological process that is literally out of place in the novel’s post-apocalyptic setting. Gentrification here not only means the act of the survivors kicking out the dead, which by itself is an interesting and telling analogy; Whitehead’s use of a concept that at its heart is about social mobility could also be read as a self-reflexive commentary on the gentrification of the genre as such. With each blockbuster film that capitalizes on a post-apocalyptic setting to guarantee profits, what used to be a politically subversive form has arguably lost its critical potential and political momentum, instead settling into the mainstream.

A particularly subliminal way in which *Zone One* nods to post-apocalyptic generic conventions manifests itself when the protagonist Mark Spitz encounters a group of zombies. Here, the hetero-diegetic narrator takes a step back and observes that “Time slowed down in situations like this, to grant dread a bigger stage” (16). Through this reflection on the very act of narration, the novel self-consciously addresses the genre’s tendency to stretch narrated time in moments of suspense and thus lays bare the very strings that hold the narrative together as a construct.

Yet the novel also repeatedly references literary conventions on a level of content by dropping a variety of stereotypical clichés. For instance, the day the “curtain fell” (9) is described as “the great unraveling” (12), or “The End of the World As We Know it” (42). Besides these sardonic signifiers that suggest lack of imagination in a genre that deals with the very limits of imagining the end, the novel also implements a variety of low puns such as PASD (Post-Apocalyptic-Stress-Disorder), or the “Tromanhauser Triplets” (42), who barely survive the apocalypse. The absence or scarcity of the newborn in post-apocalyptic narratives, which usually bears a sentimental value, I would argue, is here ridiculed by the hyperbolic insertion of the triplets. While the redemptive importance of new life lies at the heart of movies like Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2006) or novels such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), *Zone One* reflects upon the literary and ideological function of the depiction of innocent life and reproduction in these deadly environments. Keeping in mind *The Road*’s infamously graphic image of the “charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (212), it becomes clear to what extent Whitehead’s novel criticizes the sentimental, religious, and/or heteronormative utilization of children in such narratives and opts instead for a more humorous take on these matters.⁹ This is neatly conveyed in the tongue-in-cheek alliteration of the “Tromanhauser Triplets” that highlights the linguistic artificiality of this otherwise mimetic constituent.

Zone One also reflects on acts of naming as part of the post-apocalyptic situation and therefore undermines the previously mentioned ideological function of positing ends for

⁹ See in this context Lee Edelman’s polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

political ends. Part of the government's scheme to rejuvenate the "vanished order that might reassert itself" (45) is to impose a "new vocabulary of the disaster:"

Other phrases in vogue were less invigorating and uplifting: extinction, doomsday, end of the world. They lacked the zing. They did not stir the masses from their poly-this poly-that inflatable mattresses to pledge their lives to reconstruction. [...] It was a new day. Now, the people were no longer mere survivors, half-mad refugees, a pathetic, shit-flecked, traumatized herd, but the 'American Phoenix'. The more popular diminutive *pheenie* had taken off in the settlements, which also endured their round of cosmetics, as Camp 14 was rechristened New Vista, and Roanoke become Bubbling Brooks. (79)

Just as in the case of the triplets, *Zone One* here emphasizes the instrumentalization of language for the political endeavor of rehabilitating the lost order. In this instance, the novel touches upon a discourse that, as was already mentioned, is specific to and particularly powerful in the United States. Especially in relation to the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 (which is investigated by Nikhil Jayadevan's contribution to this special issue) one may glimpse how the socio-political milieu of the United States displays "an obscure desire for catastrophe" as Badiou phrases it in *Ethics* (38).

Yet what *Zone One* seems to criticize by laying bare the formal mechanisms of its genre is not only a desire for ends but the very act of how these ends are dealt with. Whitehead suggests that ends in themselves are not the problem, but rather the way in which particular ideologies try to go beyond these ends without doing them justice, by simply positing new beginnings in their wake. Whitehead's critique of the post-apocalyptic genre could thus be seen as boiling down to a rejection of this discourse's very narrative premise: Instead of doing justice to the 'end of the world', most of these fictions merely show how the world in some way or other moves on. By persistently avoiding acknowledgment of the end of the world in emphatic terms, hardly any imagination of the apocalypse is really invested in the end, but only in the ways in which the end is transcended, how societies are formed and re-formed after the 'end.'

While the novel calls upon us to acknowledge the possibility of an end (the end of humankind, since the zombies will eventually overrun them), at the same time, it questions another discourse of ends that has gained momentum only fairly recently. As in his earlier novels (particularly *Apex Hides the Hurt* and *The Intuitionist*), Whitehead's most recent book

also plays with the readerly assumption of a white protagonist who is, towards the end of the novel, revealed as an African American. This play on the presumed racial belonging of a focalizing agent interweaves with what some have called post-black phenomena. One could read the revelation of the central character's race as thus being indifferent to racial discourses, given the novel's solemn setting and the different priorities it raises. Indeed, the novel comments on this:

There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them. Would the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this Zone, and the next, and so on, and they were packed together again, tight and suffocating on top of each other? Or was that particular bramble of animosities, fears, and envies impossible to recreate? If they could bring back paperwork, Mark Spitz thought, they could certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns.

There were plenty of things in the world that deserved to stay dead, yet they walked. (231).

The fluidity of binary Us-Them systems is here made evident in the transition from 'Them,' first denoting the undead, to 'they' in the following sentence, referring to the survivors. Throughout the novel, the distinctions between zombies and the living continuously collapse to the extent that one cannot say for certain whether Mark Spitz is not a zombie himself. At one point he is described as such: "Sometimes he had trouble speaking to other people, rummaging for language, and it seemed to him that an invisible layer divided him from the rest of the world, a membrane of emotional surface tension" (53). While the novel points out that these demarcations never work, just as in the case of American race relations, they have tangible repercussions. Although racial classifications (white-non-white) have supposedly gone down the gutter and are replaced by anthropological ones (human-non-human), the novel raises our awareness to the fact that positing the *end* of racial structures should be questioned: "Dead or bandit, straggler or survivor, it was often hard to tell. Did they speak, that was the first test. Did they still have language" (112). While Whitehead's novel could thus be said to comment on Kenneth Warren's provocative declaration of the end of African-American literature, or the various post-black discussions,¹⁰ I want to end this

¹⁰ In *What was African American Literature* Warren's basic argument is that with the end of the Jim

introduction instead by suggesting that *Zone One's* take on race relations ought be read in light of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*.

Often hailed as the first zombie movie of its kind, this classic B-movie from 1968 unravels the relation between the two main themes of this introduction: the end of the world and the end of race. Indeed, in its culminating scene, the protagonist Ben (Duane Jones) is the sole survivor of a zombie ambush. Tellingly, the morning after, he is shot by white policemen who sweep the land of the undead, which marks the end of the movie. In a sense, one can argue that he passes as a zombie, which implies his death. In Whitehead's novel, the reverse takes place. Although survivors begin to repossess some parts of Manhattan, the undead eventually return in massive numbers. *Zone One* ends with a cryptic *ex medias res*, where Mark Spitz simply walks into the masses of undead: "He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead" (259). Although one could read this ending as a suicidal decision that has him end up (un)dead, I see this ending as a reference to Romero's politically-charged conclusion. Whereas Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* must die because he passes as undead (and his skin color is certainly a factor in that discussion), Mark Spitz walks into the stream of zombies and manages to survive because he passes as undead. In this sense, the novel's conclusion could be seen as rewriting Romero's end by letting Mark keep on living beyond the end of the book. Mark successfully passes as undead and returns, so to speak, to his ancestry, to the racialized inception of zombie-discourse of slave relations in West Africa. In this sense, Whitehead's novel critically investigates the ideologies of ends, by narratively and politically undermining the logics of these ends (the end of the world and the end of race), while nevertheless showing how an enjambment to these ends could be configured.

What then is 'the end as enjambment'? In "On a Finally Objectless Subject," Badiou notes that it is

Crow era, the collective project of African American literature lost its basis (2). Paul C. Taylor observes that "[t]he idea of post-blackness [...] derives from the work of [Thelma] Golden" (626). Particularly her curatory work at the Studio Museum in Harlem is said to have initiated the discourse on Post-Blackness. The concept of 'Post-soul' had been circulating before that, probably first in Nelson George's 1992 *Baps, B-Boys Buppies, Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture*.

too easy to claim that the imperative of the times is one of completion, and that, as modern Narratives linking subject, science and History are foreclosed, we must either explore the formless *dis-covered* this foreclosure bequeaths us or sustain turning back towards the Greek origin of thinking a pure question. I propose instead the following hypothesis: what is demanded of us is an additional step in the modern, and not a veering towards the limit, whether it be termed "post-modern" or whatever. [...] The predication of an "end" is an enjambment that prohibits resolution when one is unaware of how to proceed on to the next step. (93)

Unlike Badiou's diagnosis that the "predication of an 'end'" constitutes an enjambment indicative of the uncertainty of "how to proceed," I see this poetic device as an appropriate and intriguing concept that allows us to question the very positing of an end, if only to be able to declare a new beginning. The end that Badiou has in mind is obviously that of the subject (about which Mara Maticevic will have more to say in this volume). Simply abandoning the subject and declaring it dead, which would metaphorically imply the end of the poem, is not a cohesive alternative for Badiou. Like an enjambment, he wants to undermine the teleology of this discourse and offers a "next step." Importantly, while this step ahead is nothing entirely new, since, after all, it is still part of the same structure (or poem), it also offers a visual and typographic break. More generally, how can we make sense of this poetic device in questioning the ends that these discourses of the end want to sell us, and what do we need in order to formulate not simply new beginnings that are blind to the past, but enjambments? This special issue provides some ways to think beyond the end and asks whether this is even a possibility in the first place.

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