



Zombies of Capital

On Reading Ling Ma's
Severance

Reflections, by Robert Laliberte. From Antony Gormley, *Reflections II*, DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA.

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Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him.

Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One* (1867)

As a true man of his times, Marx liked to pepper his writings with analogies from the gothic imaginary (Steven 2018). Ghosts, vampires, and undead monsters all make their appearances in his work—one just has to think about the incipit of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), where readers are told that ‘a spectre is

haunting Europe: the spectre of communism.’ And, as Umberto Eco (2002) pointed out, we should remember that this was a time when ‘we were still close to the preromantic and romantic flourishing of the gothic novel, and spectres were entities that had to be taken seriously’. Far from being considered curious aberrations, these preternatural metaphors have given rise to a whole literature on spectral capitalism. Jacques Derrida is probably the most famous intellectual who engaged with this aspect of Marx’s oeuvre, in his *Spectres of Marx* (1993), but we should not forget Chris Harman with his *Zombie Capitalism* (2009), and David McNally’s *Monsters of the Market* (2012). In Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* (2009, 15), we find this memorable passage:

The most Gothic description of Capital is also the most accurate. Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us. There is a sense in which it simply is the case that the political elite *are* our servants; the miserable service they provide from us is to launder our libidos, to obligingly represent for us our disavowed desires as if they had nothing to do with us.

Despite being a novel, Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) clearly belongs to this intellectual tradition. The book is narrated by Candace Chen, a young woman from a family of Chinese immigrants in the United States who finds herself in the middle of a pandemic that mutates most of mankind into zombies. After escaping from New York, she joins a small group of survivors as they make their way to a mysterious 'facility' on the outskirts of Chicago, looting houses and killing their undead occupants along the road. Unlike the dominant zombie trope in popular culture, Ling Ma's undead are not aggressive creatures and do not crave human meat—they are just doomed to repeat ad infinitum those actions that defined them during their life, until their body is completely consumed and falls apart. This meekness is loaded with meaning. When one survivor from the group that Candace joins remarks that their life feels like a horror movie, 'like a zombie or vampire flick', Bob—the self-appointed leader of the group and villain of the novel—objects that the narratives attached to the two creatures are completely different. While vampires are intrinsically individualistic creatures and the danger with them lies in their intentions, which might be either good or bad, that is not the case with zombies:

[With zombies] it's not about a specific villain. One zombie can be easily killed, but a hundred zombies is another issue. Only amassed do they really pose a threat. This narrative, then, is not about any individual

entity, per se, but about an abstract force: the force of the mob, of mob mentality. Perhaps it's better known these days as the hive mind. You can't see it. You can't forecast it. It strikes at any time, whenever, wherever, like a natural disaster, a hurricane, an earthquake. (29)

By introducing meek zombies, Ling Ma portrays a humanity so alienated that even in its non-existence, as zombies, it remains neutered. Tamed in life, these human beings become even more so in death.



Severance, by Ling Ma. Published in 2018 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Zombie Labour

The image of the zombie is the perfect vehicle for any Marxist critique of contemporary capitalist society. As Tyler Malone (2018) pointed out, the zombie as a Marxist metaphor is threefold: it simultaneously represents capital itself, which reproduces itself only by consuming living labour; the capitalist worker, who is so alienated to become a zombified living dead; and the everyday consumer trapped in an endless cycle of consumption. It is mainly in this third manifestation that the trope of

the zombie has emerged in popular Western culture, from George Romero's 1968 classic *The Night of the Living Dead* and its 1978 sequel, *Dawn of the Dead*, which is almost entirely set in a shopping mall besieged by the undead, to Jim Jarmusch's recent *The Dead Don't Die* (2019), in which zombies are seen repeatedly engaging in the same consumerist behaviour that characterised them in life.

While also an indictment of consumerism, *Severance* has a stronger focus on labour. While the book includes some explicit reflections on how globalisation has affected labour, a few descriptions of the reality of alienated work in the publishing sector, and a couple of poignant meetings between the protagonist and disgruntled Chinese and American workers, the whole novel is really a metaphor for the alienation of labour in contemporary capitalist society. In *Severance*, the 'Shen Fever' pandemic that ends humanity originated in the factories of Shenzhen. As Candace tells us: 'The reigning theory, first disseminated by a prominent doctor in the *Huffington Post*, was that the new strain of fungal spores had inadvertently developed within factory conditions of manufacturing areas, the SEZs in China, where spores fed off the highly specific mixture of chemicals' (210). Its physical and psychological symptoms are virtually indistinguishable from those that we might find in some worker toiling day and night in a sweatshop or in front of a computer screen. In its initial stages, the disease is difficult to detect, as its early signs include memory lapse, headaches, disorientation, shortness of breath, and fatigue. Later-stage symptoms include signs of malnourishment, lapse of hygiene, bruising on the skin, and impaired motor coordination (148–49). Eventually, the infected patients lose consciousness and end up in a liminal space between life and death in which they are only able to repeat over and over again the action that defined them during their life.

Two passages in *Severance* beautifully illustrate this association between zombies and the alienation of labour in late capitalism.

In the first episode, Candace films a zombie saleslady inside a deserted clothes shop in New York. These lines are worth quoting in full:

I noticed movement inside. It was a saleslady, folding and refolding pastel polo shirts. She was clearly good at her job, even in her fevered condition. The wall of bedazzled sunglasses, gleamed. The wall of handbags was artfully arranged, by model and by color.

The subsequent post was a thirty-second video of the saleslady folding T-shirts. I tried to show it from a distance; I didn't want the video to be too graphic. Half her jaw was missing. But the way she folded each garment, with an economy of movement, never breaking pace, generated a sense of calm and ease. (258)

The contrast between capitalist plenty and the alienation of labour could not be made clearer, but even as the social order of capitalism is falling apart, not everybody is willing to open their eyes to the inherent absurdity of the system. As Candace publishes the video on her blog, which is followed by a dwindling number of survivors all over the world, it immediately becomes her most popular post but also brings her criticism for 'posting disaster porn'.

The second encounter is with Eddie, a taxi driver. While the pandemic is already well under way, Candace occasionally takes his cab to go to work, but after a while he stops getting her calls and she forgets about him. One day, while trying to find a way to leave the now deserted New York, she sees a single cab driving slowly down the street, swerving across lanes. Unsure whether that is just a hallucination, she hails it. The car surprisingly slows and inside she finds Eddie, looking straight ahead, unresponsive just like a zombie. When Candace pulls him out of the vehicle and drives away with his car, he does not provide any resistance. Only later is she assailed by the

doubt that maybe Eddie was not fevered after all, that maybe he had just been trying to get out of the city like she was and had stopped to help her. By describing this, the author seems to be telling us that the alienation of labour in our society is so pervasive that sometimes it is not possible to distinguish between our working selves and a zombie.

Reading *Severance*, one cannot but think about another illustrious literary precedent. In *House of the Dead*, his 1862 semi-autobiographical memoir from a Siberian labour camp, the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky draws from his experience as an inmate to offer a timeless reflection on the malady of labour as an action repeated over and over again without any real purpose:

It once came into my head that if it were desired to reduce a man to nothing—to punish him atrociously, to crush him in such a manner that the most hardened murderer would tremble before such a punishment, and take fright beforehand—it would only be necessary to give to his work a character of complete uselessness, even to absurdity.

Hard labor, as it is now carried on, presents no interest to the convict; but it has its utility. The convict makes bricks, digs the earth, builds; and all his occupations have a meaning and an end. Sometimes the prisoner may even take an interest in what he is doing. He then wishes to work more skillfully, more advantageously. But let him be constrained to pour water from one vessel into another, to pound sand, to move a heap of earth from one place to another, and then immediately move it back again, then I am persuaded that at the end of a few days, the prisoner would hang himself or commit a thousand capital crimes, preferring rather to die than endure such humiliation, shame, and torture. (2004, 17–18)

Although the title *House of the Dead* referred to the spiritual death and subsequent awakening of the main character of the novel, if read in the light of the passage above, the image of the ‘dead’ easily assumes a very peculiar, quasi-Marxian meaning that clearly resonates with Ling Ma’s zombies. That this passage is relevant for our understanding of labour in contemporary society has also been highlighted by anthropologist David Graeber (2018, 15–16), who finds in Dostoevsky’s words a key to interpreting the proliferation of ‘bullshit jobs’ today.

A System That Refuses to Die

Of course, *Severance* remains first of all a novel—and a very enjoyable one at that. If the mere narrative skills of the author were not enough, the eerie similarities with the current Covid-19 pandemic make this book surprisingly relatable. Just like in the current pandemic, the fictional Shen Fever also originates in China, where the government initially reacts by hiding the real numbers of infected in order not to scare investment away. To prevent the spread of the fungus through the migrations of people and merchandise, various countries, including the United States, impose travel bans. At some point, Candace even finds herself wondering whether the pandemic has made humanity more stupid: ‘Who knew what was true. The sheer density of information and misinformation at the End, encapsulated in news articles and message-board theories and clickbait traps that had propagated hysterically through retweets and shares, had effectively rendered us more ignorant, more helpless, more innocent in our stupidity’ (31).

Severance is also the story of a family of Chinese immigrants to the United States, and their inner tension as the mother would like to go back to China and the father to stay. If we focus exclusively on Candace’s trajectory, the book is the opposite of a *bildungsroman*.

She starts off as a budding photographer trying to develop a project on the decline of the American rustbelt—another reminder that the book is really about labour—wanders for months around the streets of New York taking photos for her blog, then progressively gives up her artistic pretensions as she takes on a corporate job that involves managing the manufacture of Bibles. It takes the pandemic to make her retrieve some of her passion for photography. Candace makes it clear that she holds no illusion towards her job, and at some point even informs her boss that she wants to quit, only to change her mind immediately thereafter. She considers leaving New York with her boyfriend, but once again she chooses not to quit her job because she would feel lost without it. Even in the middle of the pandemic, as all her colleagues die or leave, she decides to keep working in exchange for a huge amount of money promised by her boss. She moves into the office and keeps sending emails and coming up with useless tasks just to fill the time. Only on the day when her contract finally expires, by mistake she locks herself out of the premises and is finally free—just to discover that at that point money had lost all its value.

While working at all these levels, *Severance* functions at its best as the story of a system that refuses to die. With this novel, Ling Ma has provided a graphic commentary on Frederick Jameson's famous remark that 'it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism' (Fisher 2009). The futility of any present endeavour to reimagine capitalism is highlighted by the fact that the story takes place in 2011, at the height of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Candace tells us that with the onset of the pandemic, Zuccotti Park came to resemble a deserted refugee camp, littered with abandoned tents, tarps, and pieces of clothing, not to mention the occasional discarded protest signs: 'PEOPLE BEFORE PROFITS. DEPRIVATIZE DEMOCRACY. WE ARE THE 99%. EAT THE RICH' (214). While this last attempt at resisting the capitalist system was miserably failing, the ridiculousness of life under late capitalism

continued unabated. Candace describes how, even while the pandemic was already critical, the New York Fashion Week was still being held, with models sent down the runway in face masks, gloves, and even scrubs, many branded with designers logos (211). It took the collapse of the hidden infrastructure of essential human labour that sustained it for society to finally break down for good. However, even then, as the undead took over, capitalism found a way to survive in the mechanical actions of people's soulless bodies. ■

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