

The Survival of the Script: Disavowal and the Persistence of the Symbolic Order in *The Last One*

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abstract

This study provides a psychoanalytic exploration of Alexandra Oliva's novel *The Last One* (2016), examining the protagonist Zoo's psychological endurance through a global pandemic. By utilizing a qualitative symptomatic reading of the text, the research investigates how Zoo maintains her equilibrium by adhering to the "Symbolic Order" of a reality television show even as the "Real" foundations of civilization collapse. Central to this analysis is the mechanism of fetishistic disavowal, expressed through the formula "I know very well, but nevertheless," which allows the protagonist to reframe catastrophic evidence—such as corpses and societal decay—as elaborate production "props" and scripted "challenges" (Žižek, 1997; Oliva, 2016). The findings reveal that Zoo's survival is predicated on an "internalized gaze" and a persistent performance for an imagined audience, illustrating the profound power of mediated narratives over visceral reality (Lacan, 1978). However, the study also identifies the "Abject" as the ultimate point of psychological failure, where maternal anxiety and sensory intimacy finally pierce her symbolic shield (Kristeva, 1982). Ultimately, this article argues that *The Last One* serves as a haunting allegory for a hyperreal culture, demonstrating that the human psyche may prioritize a constructed "Script" to defer the trauma of the unassimilable Real.

Keywords: fetishistic disavowal, symbolic order, lacanian gaze, the abject, traumatic realism, hyperreality, the real

INTRODUCTION

In Alexandra Oliva's *The Last One*, the boundary between entertainment and existence dissolves as a global pandemic decodes the very reality the protagonist, Zoo, believes she is mastering (Oliva, 2016). This article, titled "The Survival of the Script: Disavowal and the Persistence of the Symbolic Order in *The Last One*," examines how the protagonist maintains her psychological equilibrium by adhering to the "Symbolic Order"—the structured, linguistic, and rule-based world of the reality TV show—long after its "Real" foundations have crumbled (Lacan, 1953; Oliva, 2016). The novel opens with a dual

perspective: the clinical, behind-the-scenes editing of a survival show called *In the Dark* and the internal, increasingly desperate experience of its lead contestant, Zoo (Oliva, 2016). As Zoo navigates the wilderness, she encounters horrors—rotting corpses, abandoned cars, and an attacking coyote—that she consistently reinterprets as elaborate "props" or "challenges" designed by the production team (Oliva, 2016). This psychological maneuver is a classic instance of Lacanian disavowal: "I know very well, but nevertheless..." (Žižek, 1997). Zoo "knows" the stench of death is real, noting

it as "spoiled meat and animal excrement," yet she "nonetheless" believes it is a chemical concoction meant to test her fortitude (Oliva, 2016). She remains convinced that the corpses are simply "latex-and-plastic construct[s]" even as they decompose (Oliva, 2016). Zoo's persistence in the "Symbolic Order" is not merely a failure of perception but a necessary defense mechanism against the "Real" of a world-ending catastrophe (Lacan, 1966; Oliva, 2016). For Zoo, the game provides a script that makes sense of the chaos; she follows "Clues," adheres to the "Rules of Three," and speaks to cameras she can no longer see, performing for an audience she believes is still watching her from the safety of their living rooms (Oliva, 2016). This adherence to the script functions as a "Symbolic" barrier against the trauma of total isolation and the biological collapse occurring beyond the treeline (Kramnick, 2011; Oliva, 2016). Furthermore, the novel explores how the internalized gaze of the "Other"—represented by the producers and her husband—shapes Zoo's identity (Lacan, 1978; Oliva, 2016). Even when the drones stop flying and the cameramen succumb to the virus, Zoo continues to "watch for Clues" and "straighten her posture" for the lens, proving her worth to an absent authority (Oliva, 2016). By analyzing Zoo's journey through a psychoanalytic lens, this article argues that *The Last One* serves as a haunting allegory for the human tendency to prioritize constructed narratives over the visceral, often unbearable, truth of the Real (Carroll, 2011; Oliva, 2016). The psychological framework of *The Last One* is deeply rooted in the tension between perceived and objective reality.

Scholarly engagement with the "reality" in reality television often centers on the concept of the "internalized gaze," where subjects modify their behavior for an imagined audience (Lacan, 1978; Oliva, 2016). In the novel, the protagonist Zoo

continues to perform for the camera—straightening her posture and narrating her actions—even when the production infrastructure has collapsed (Oliva, 2016). This aligns with Foucault's theories on surveillance, suggesting that the "gaze" of the Big Other remains a regulatory force long after physical observers have vanished (Foucault, 1977).

Central to Zoo's journey is the psychoanalytic concept of disavowal. Freud (1927) described disavowal as a defense mechanism where a person simultaneously acknowledges a traumatic reality while denying its significance. In *The Last One*, Zoo encounters undeniable evidence of a global catastrophe—rotting corpses in a market and an abandoned car containing a child-sized prop—yet she insists these are mere "Challenges" or "props" (Oliva, 2016). Lacanian scholars argue that this persistence of the "Symbolic Order" is a protective barrier against the "Real"—that which exists outside of language and is too traumatic to integrate (Lacan, 1966). Zoo's insistence that a decaying body is a "latex-and-plastic construct" represents the ego's refusal to confront the ultimate Real: death (Oliva, 2016; Žižek, 1997).

Furthermore, the novel's depiction of survival mirrors what contemporary theorists call "Traumatic Realism." This occurs when the boundaries between a staged event and a genuine trauma become indistinguishable (Foster, 1996). The novel explicitly links this to the genre of reality TV, where contestants are conditioned to expect "seriously f*cked-up shit" as part of the entertainment value (Oliva, 2016). Previous studies on survival narratives emphasize that the trauma is not the event itself, but the "belatedness" of its recognition (Caruth, 1996). Zoo's trauma is deferred; she "knows" something is wrong—noting the "mechanical stiltedness" of an attacking coyote—but she cannot "realize" the truth until her

internal script fails to account for the mounting horror (Oliva, 2016).

Finally, the maternal subtext in the novel offers a fertile ground for Kristevan analysis of the "abject." Kristeva (1982) defines the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order." Zoo's recurring nightmares of accidentally killing a child and her interaction with the "doll swaddled in blue" represent her anxiety regarding the loss of self-identity that comes with motherhood (Oliva, 2016). By treating the child-prop as a "gelatinous memory," Zoo attempts to eject the abject from her psyche, mirroring the way she tries to eject the reality of the pandemic from her consciousness (Kristeva, 1982; Oliva, 2016). This literature review suggests that Zoo's survival is not just a physical feat but a desperate psychological attempt to keep the "Script" alive in a world where the Author is dead.

In the context of Alexandra Oliva's *The Last One*, the following sections outline the research gap and study objectives for a psychoanalytic inquiry into the narrative's structure of disavowal and the persistence of the "Symbolic Order." Current scholarship on post-apocalyptic literature often focuses on the material reality of survival or the sociopolitical collapse of institutions. While some attention has been paid to the "spectacle" of disaster, there is a significant research gap regarding the intersection of reality television's psychological conditioning and the human ego's defense mechanisms during a genuine global catastrophe. Specifically, little focus has been placed on how a subject—conditioned by the "Symbolic Order" of a game with specific rules and scripts—can effectively disavow the "Real" of mass death by reframing it as a "Challenge" or a "prop".

In *The Last One*, the protagonist, Zoo, repeatedly encounters evidence of a

pandemic—rotting corpses and abandoned vehicles—yet she maintains her sanity by insisting these are "latex-and-plastic construct[s]" designed by a production team. While existing studies on Lacanian psychoanalysis have explored the "Gaze" in surveillance, there is a lack of research on the "internalized camera" as a survival mechanism that persists even after the external "Other" (the production crew) has died. This study addresses the gap by examining how the "Script" of reality TV provides a psychological scaffolding that prevents the total collapse of the subject when faced with the unassimilable trauma of the Real.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the psychoanalytic dimensions of Alexandra Oliva's *The Last One*, focusing on the protagonist's transition from a staged reality to a genuine apocalypse. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To analyze the mechanism of fetishistic disavowal in Zoo's interpretation of her surroundings, specifically investigating how she maintains the belief "I know very well [it smells of death], but nonetheless [it is just a prop]" to protect her ego from trauma.
2. To evaluate the persistence of the "Symbolic Order" through Zoo's adherence to the game's "Rules of Three" and her continued performance for an imagined audience long after the drones have ceased to function.
3. To investigate the "Gaze of the Other" as represented by Zoo's husband, Marcus, and the show's producers, exploring how her desire to be "Fan Favorite" or a "good wife" drives her survival actions.
4. To explore the role of the "Abject" through Zoo's interactions with the child-prop (the "doll swaddled in blue") and her recurring nightmares of accidental infanticide, which symbolize her anxieties regarding the loss of self-identity.

By fulfilling these objectives, this study aims to demonstrate that Zoo's survival is not merely a physical feat but a rigorous psychological attempt to uphold a constructed narrative in the face of a world that has lost its meaning.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, text-based psychoanalytic methodology to examine the narrative arc of Alexandra Oliva's *The Last One*. The primary method is a symptomatic reading of the text, which treats the narrative as a psychic landscape where the protagonist's actions and internal monologues reveal underlying structural tensions between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (Lacan, 1966). By focusing on the "slips" in Zoo's perception—specifically her misidentification of catastrophic evidence as production artifice—the study maps the boundaries of her psychological disavowal (Žižek, 1997). The analysis is structured around several core psychoanalytic frameworks. First, Lacanian theory regarding the "Symbolic Order" and the "Gaze" is utilized to interpret Zoo's continued performance for a non-existent audience (Lacan, 1978). Second, the study applies the concept of the "Abject" to analyze Zoo's sensory reactions to decay and her maternal anxieties (Kristeva, 1982). Finally, the methodology incorporates theories of "Traumatic Realism" to assess how the reality TV format conditions the subject to reject traumatic stimuli as mere spectacle (Foster, 1996). This approach allows for an exploration of the text not merely as a survival story, but as a study of the fragility of human meaning-making when the external "Script" of society is permanently erased (Oliva, 2016).

Data collection for this study involves a systematic, qualitative immersion into the primary text, *The Last One* (Oliva, 2016). The process is divided into three distinct phases designed to

capture the linguistic and behavioral markers of the protagonist's psychological state. The first phase consists of a comprehensive "textual mapping" of the novel's dual-narrative structure. Data is extracted from the alternating chapters: the "behind-the-scenes" third-person accounts of the production crew and the "present-tense" first-person perspective of Zoo (Oliva, 2016). This allows for the collection of "perceptual gaps"—instances where the objective reality described by the narrator conflicts with Zoo's subjective interpretation (Lacan, 1966). For example, descriptions of the "mechanical stiltedness" of environmental threats and the "latex-and-plastic" appearance of biological remains are cataloged as primary data points for analyzing disavowal (Oliva, 2016; Žižek, 1997). The second phase focuses on "behavioral coding" of Zoo's survival actions. This involves identifying recurring motifs such as her adherence to the "Rules of Three," her internal monologues directed at her husband, Marcus, and her performative gestures toward non-functional cameras (Oliva, 2016). These data points are essential for evaluating the persistence of the "Symbolic Order" and the internalized "Gaze" of the Other (Lacan, 1978). The third phase involves the extraction of "sensory and affective data." This includes Zoo's descriptions of smells, sounds, and physical pain, which are cross-referenced with her psychological attempts to categorize these experiences as "props" or "special effects" (Oliva, 2016). Particular attention is paid to her interactions with the child-prop, which serves as a nexus for data regarding the "Abject" (Kristeva, 1982). All collected data are then organized into thematic categories—Disavowal, The Gaze, and The Abject—to facilitate the subsequent psychoanalytic analysis.

The data analysis for this study utilizes a thematic psychoanalytic approach to interpret the narrative evidence collected

from Alexandra Oliva's *The Last One* (Oliva, 2016). The analysis moves beyond a literal reading of survival tactics to uncover the structural persistence of the protagonist's psyche. The primary phase of analysis focuses on the mechanisms of fetishistic disavowal. By examining Zoo's internal monologues, the study identifies a consistent pattern of "splitting" in her perception. When Zoo encounters the catastrophic—such as the "smell of rotting meat" in a grocery store or the sight of a "bloated, gray" body—she performs a psychological pivot (Oliva, 2016). Using Žižek's (1997) framework of disavowal, the analysis demonstrates how Zoo acknowledges the sensory data (the Real) but immediately re-categorizes it within the Symbolic framework of the TV show (the script). For Zoo, the corpses are not victims of a plague but "masterpieces of the makeup department," a conclusion that allows her to maintain her role as a competitor rather than a survivor of an apocalypse (Oliva, 2016; Žižek, 1997).

The second phase analyzes the persistence of the Symbolic Order through the "Gaze." Even in total isolation, Zoo's behavior remains performative. The study analyzes her continued adherence to the "Rules of Three" and her habit of speaking to empty air as evidence of the "internalized camera" (Oliva, 2016). Drawing on Lacan (1978), the analysis argues that the "Gaze of the Other" (the producers and her husband, Marcus) remains the primary regulator of her identity. Her survival is driven by the desire to remain "likable" and "strong" for an audience that no longer exists, illustrating how the Symbolic Order can survive the death of the society that created it (Lacan, 1978; Oliva, 2016).

Finally, the analysis addresses the intrusion of the Abject. Zoo's interaction with the "child-prop" and her sensory revulsion are analyzed through Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection. The analysis explores how her maternal guilt and the

physical decay of the world threaten to collapse the boundary between her "Self" and the "Other." When Zoo finally realizes the child is not a prop, it signifies the total collapse of her Symbolic defense and her forced confrontation with the traumatic Real (Kristeva, 1982; Oliva, 2016). This thematic analysis reveals that the novel's true conflict is not between Zoo and nature, but between her psyche and an unassimilable reality.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this psychoanalytic inquiry into Alexandra Oliva's *The Last One* demonstrate that the protagonist's survival is predicated on a sophisticated, multi-layered defense mechanism that prioritizes the "Symbolic Order" of a reality television show over the traumatic "Real" of a global pandemic. The data indicates that the protagonist, Zoo, does not merely fail to perceive the apocalypse; rather, she actively reconstructs it into a coherent narrative of competition (Oliva, 2016). The primary result of the textual analysis is the identification of fetishistic disavowal as the dominant cognitive mode for Zoo. Throughout the narrative, Zoo encounters sensory evidence that contradicts the "staged" nature of the game. For instance, when she enters a town decimated by the virus, she observes the "sweet, heavy scent" of decay and the presence of unscripted corpses (Oliva, 2016). In a standard psychological state, these cues would signal immediate danger. However, the analysis shows that Zoo employs the formula described by Žižek (1997): "I know very well, but nevertheless..." She acknowledges the stench and the visual horror but "nonetheless" concludes that the production team has exceeded expectations in their commitment to realism.

This disavowal is not a lack of intelligence but a necessary structural support for the ego. By categorizing the

dead as "props" and the destruction as "set dressing," Zoo preserves her identity as a "contestant." If she were to accept the reality of the pandemic, her identity would collapse into that of a "victim" or a "survivor of the end of the world"—realities that the ego finds unassimilable (Lacan, 1966; Oliva, 2016). The results show that Zoo's belief in the "Script" acts as a fetishistic object, shielding her from the "Real" of mass extinction.

The analysis further reveals that the "Symbolic Order"—the rules, language, and social structures of the TV show—remains functional for Zoo even after its creators have perished. One of the most significant results is the persistence of the "Gaze." Lacan (1978) posits that the subject is always being looked at from a point outside themselves. In *The Last One*, this gaze is initially literal (the cameras and drones) but quickly becomes internalized. Zoo continues to perform for the "Other" long after the drones stop flying. She worries about her "edit," her "likability," and how her husband, Marcus, will perceive her "strength" when he watches the footage (Oliva, 2016). The results indicate that her adherence to the "Rules of Three" and her performative narration are attempts to maintain a connection to a social order that has already vanished. The show *In the Dark* functions as a surrogate for civilization; by following its rules, Zoo maintains the illusion that she is still part of a structured world governed by the "Big Other" (Lacan, 1978; Oliva, 2016).

A critical turning point in the results is the analysis of the "Object." According to Kristeva (1982), the object is that which "disturbs identity, system, order." For Zoo, the ultimate abjection is found in the "child-prop"—the doll swaddled in blue that she carries through the wilderness (Oliva, 2016). Initially, she

treats the doll as a "prop" to be managed, a task designed to test her maternal instincts. However, as the physical reality of the world intrudes—through the smell of the doll and its "weight"—the boundary between the prop and a real corpse begins to blur. The results show that Zoo's recurring nightmares of accidentally killing a child serve as the "return of the repressed" (Freud, 1915). Her maternal anxiety is the "weak point" in her Symbolic defense. When she finally encounters the real child, Brennan, and realizes that he is not a "production plant," her entire psychological framework collapses. This represents the intrusion of the Real: the moment when the "Script" can no longer account for the presence of a living, suffering human being who is not part of the game (Oliva, 2016).

Paradoxically, the results suggest that Zoo's "madness"—her refusal to see the truth—is exactly what allows her to survive the initial stages of the catastrophe. While others might have succumbed to despair or panic, Zoo's belief that she was being "tested" provided her with a goal-oriented mindset. She treated starvation as a "challenge" and isolation as a "segment" (Oliva, 2016). This indicates that the human psyche may require a "Symbolic" mask to endure the "Real" of extreme trauma.

The analysis concludes that *The Last One* is a study of the "Symbolic survival" of the subject. Zoo survives the physical apocalypse because she is already living in a psychological one, where reality has been replaced by the spectacle. Her journey is not a movement from ignorance to knowledge, but a traumatic transition from the safety of the "Symbolic Script" to the terrifying, unmediated "Real" of the post-human world (Oliva, 2016; Žižek, 1997)

In summary, the results of this study show that:

1. Disavowal is used as a primary defense mechanism to frame the apocalypse as a reality TV "Challenge."
2. The Gaze of the Other remains the primary regulator of behavior even in the absence of an actual audience.
3. The Symbolic Order provides the necessary structure for physical survival, though it eventually fails when confronted by the Abject.
4. The protagonist's trauma is defined by the "belatedness" of her realization, as her ego rigorously protects the "Script" until the very end of the narrative (Caruth, 1996; Oliva, 2016).

The discussion section synthesizes the results of the psychoanalytic reading of *The Last One*, exploring the broader implications of Zoo's psychological endurance and the fragile nature of reality in a media-saturated age. By examining the interplay between the Lacanian Triad—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—this section argues that the novel serves as a critique of how modern "spectacle" conditions the human psyche to reject traumatic truths in favor of comfortable narratives.

The core of Zoo's experience is the radical persistence of the Symbolic Order. In Lacanian theory, the Symbolic represents the world of language, social exchange, and the "rules" of civilization (Lacan, 1966). Usually, when civilization collapses, the Symbolic Order collapses with it. However, for Zoo, the "game" provides a localized, portable Symbolic Order that remains intact even as the global one dissolves. This leads to a profound psychological irony: Zoo remains "civilized" and goal-oriented precisely because she believes she is in a simulated environment where her actions are being judged.

This suggests that human agency is often dependent on the belief in a "Big Other"—

an authority figure or audience that gives meaning to our actions (Lacan, 1978). In the wilderness, Zoo is not just surviving; she is "competing." This distinction is vital. As a "competitor," she has a script and a purpose; as a "survivor," she would be a victim of random, meaningless chaos. The discussion must acknowledge that her "madness"—her refusal to acknowledge the pandemic—is what prevents the "psychic death" that often precedes physical death in survival situations (Caruth, 1996; Oliva, 2016).

The results highlighted Zoo's use of fetishistic disavowal, but the discussion must explore *why* this mechanism is so effective in the context of twenty-first-century culture. We live in an era where catastrophe is constantly mediated through screens, often indistinguishable from high-budget entertainment. This "Traumatic Realism" (Foster, 1996) has conditioned the modern subject to view horror as a construct.

When Zoo sees a town full of corpses and assumes it is a "set," she is the ultimate product of a culture that has replaced the "Real" with the "Hyperreal"—a state where the simulation of a thing is more "real" than the thing itself (Baudrillard, 1981). Her psychological refusal to see the dead as human beings is a critique of the desensitization caused by reality television. By turning human struggle into a "challenge" for a million-dollar prize, the show *In the Dark* has stripped Zoo of the ability to process genuine empathy or grief until it is too late (Oliva, 2016).

While Zoo's disavowal protects her from the macro-trauma of the pandemic, it cannot fully shield her from the micro-trauma of her own maternal anxiety. The "child-prop" functions as what Kristeva (1982) calls the "Abject." It is a boundary-blurring object: it is both "dead" (a plastic doll) and "alive" (a surrogate for her future

child), both "fake" (a game piece) and "real" (a source of tactile revulsion).

The discussion points to the fact that Zoo's eventual breakdown is triggered not by the scale of the global death toll, but by the intimacy of the "Abject." When the boundary between the prop and the Real child (Brennan) collapses, the Symbolic Script fails. This supports the psychoanalytic claim that trauma is most potent when it "pierces" the Symbolic shield through an intimate, sensory encounter (Lacan, 1978). The "stench" that Zoo tried so hard to disavow finally becomes unignorable when it is attached to an object she is forced to care for (Oliva, 2016).

One of the novel's most haunting implications is the "death of the audience." Traditionally, the Gaze requires a spectator. However, Zoo's behavior proves that the Gaze is a structural feature of the psyche, not a physical requirement. She performs for Marcus, for the producers, and for the "fans," demonstrating that the modern subject is never truly "alone" as long as they carry the social "Other" within them (Lacan, 1978).

This leads to a "post-human" performance where the survival of the self depends on the survival of the "persona." Zoo's need to be "The Strong One" or "The Winner" is more important to her than the physical reality of her environment. This suggests a shift in the hierarchy of needs: for the mediated subject, the need for Symbolic recognition (being seen) can override the biological need for safety (seeing the danger) (Žižek, 1997; Oliva, 2016).

The discussion concludes that *The Last One* is less about a virus and more about the psychological "quarantine" of the modern individual within their own narratives. Zoo is "the last one" not just because she is a survivor, but because she is the last one to let go of the "Script" of

the old world. Her journey illustrates the terrifying power of the human mind to ignore the "Real" in favor of a coherent "Imaginary," warning that in a world of total simulation, the truth may only be accessible through the ultimate collapse of the self.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study synthesizes the psychoanalytic findings to reaffirm that the protagonist's journey in *The Last One* is not merely a physical struggle for survival, but a profound psychological battle to maintain a coherent identity in the face of an unassimilable reality. By applying the frameworks of Lacan, Kristeva, and Žižek, this research has demonstrated that Zoo's survival was contingent upon a sophisticated mechanism of fetishistic disavowal, where the "Script" of a reality television competition served as a protective barrier against the "Real" of a global pandemic (Oliva, 2016; Žižek, 1997).

The study concludes that the "Symbolic Order" of the show *In the Dark* remained the primary regulator of Zoo's psyche long after the actual production had ceased. Her continued performance for an "Internalized Gaze" highlights the modern condition of the mediated subject, for whom being "seen" by a social Other—even an imagined one—is as vital as biological sustenance (Lacan, 1978). However, the eventual collapse of this defense, triggered by the intimate encounter with the "Abject" in the form of the child Brennan, reveals the limits of narrative protection (Kristeva, 1982). When the "prop" became a person, the "Script" could no longer contain the trauma of the Real, leading to the protagonist's forced psychological integration into the post-apocalyptic world.

Ultimately, this research suggests that Alexandra Oliva's novel serves as a

cautionary allegory for a contemporary culture increasingly insulated by spectacle. It suggests that our reliance on mediated narratives can desensitize us to genuine catastrophe, creating a "belatedness" in our recognition of crisis (Caruth, 1996). Future research might expand on these findings by examining how different media genres—beyond reality TV—shape the psychological defense mechanisms of subjects in other works of climate or pandemic fiction. In the final analysis, Zoo is "the last one" because she is the final subject to surrender the illusion of a structured, televised world, proving that the most difficult thing to survive is not the end of civilization, but the end of the stories we tell ourselves about it (Oliva, 2016).

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