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# Monsters in Common: Identity and Community in Postapocalyptic Science Fiction After 9/11

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Monsters in Common: Identity and Community in Postapocalyptic Science Fiction After 9/11

Monsters in Common: Identity and Community in Postapocalyptic Science Fiction After 9/11

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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## **Abstract**

In the aftermath 11 September, 2001, postapocalyptic science fiction has offered a way to make sense of the events of that day, as well as the years of social, cultural and political upheaval that have followed. In many ways, 9/11 began immediately to take on apocalyptic significance in the American national narrative, seemingly marking the end of one period and the beginning of another, entirely different one. To think of 9/11 as a kind of apocalyptic break with the past, however, does not tell the whole story. Moreover, such thinking denies key historical linkages between the American response to 9/11 and to earlier moments of crisis or catastrophe, particularly during the latter half of the twentieth century. After 9/11, conversations about security quickly turned to discussions of the concepts of identity and community—discussions that recall the social, cultural and political pressures of the 1950s and the Cold War. Within this horizon, this study explores the ways in which postapocalyptic science fiction after 9/11 examines the limits and consequences of social, cultural and political definitions of identity and community in the dominant American narrative. Looking at the close symbolic relationship between masculine identity and the figure of the hero in postapocalyptic science fiction, I argue that postapocalyptic science fiction after 9/11 represents a cultural space dedicated to imagining new ways of thinking about identity and community, predominantly by deconstructing the traditional relationship between the twinned figures of man and monster. Indeed, such a focus is also evident in postapocalyptic science fiction from the 1950s onward, such that, when considered from a historical perspective, postapocalyptic science fiction after 9/11 participates in a rich tradition of using vampires, zombies and other monsters to explore the dangers of holding too tightly to a single definition of identity, as well as to promote the value of community.

## Acknowledgements

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## **Dedication**

*For Liam and for Elizabeth.*

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## INTRODUCTION

“Risk and adventure must be re-invented against safety and comfort.”

—Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*

Since 11 September 2001, postapocalyptic science fiction has served as a way of making sense not only of the events of 9/11, but also the cultural and political aftermaths of that day that have gone on to shape the fabric of everyday life in America. Popular representations of 9/11 have consistently borrowed imagery from stories of the apocalypse, images mined as much from the Christian tradition as from science fiction. Such a postmodern mediation of disaster is typical in the American imagination, in which fiction and religious myth often serve as the closest analog for historical events (Quinby 2).<sup>1</sup> On the level of popular culture, however, works of science fiction have repeatedly engaged debates over the political, cultural and social meaning (and memory) of 9/11, and, in so doing, many of these texts have drawn into sharp relief the inadequacies and dangers of the apocalyptic imagination that so often underwrites the dominant American perspective on identity, difference and the practice of community. If, as Darko Suvin once argued, science fiction offers “a mapping of possible alternatives” (12), then science fiction after 9/11 has often imagined alternatives to a political, cultural and social status quo that seems unable to move beyond an apocalyptic reckoning of America’s place in the world.

The apocalyptic imagination that has suffused American politics after 9/11 is not a recent development but is deeply imbricated with a Christian tradition oriented toward a (political) desire to elaborate clear distinctions between the righteous self and the abject other. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson argues that the experience of viewing the events of 9/11 recalled, for many, a similar experience of watching special effects in a film. For more, see Jameson, “The Dialectics of Disaster.”

<sup>2</sup> For an extended discussion of the apocalyptic imagination in 1950s American science fiction,



languages of religious eschatology as much as conservative political rhetoric, such distinctions are invariably cast in a binary of good and evil (Berger 5; Cohn, *Cosmos* 227; Quinby 2). In the wake of 9/11, the American apocalyptic imagination resurfaced in the rhetoric of the war on terror and in the political abstractions that have often served to legitimize violence against others who do not fit an idealized image of civilized identity (Butler, *Precarious* 1-15). In addition to reinscribing the Christian apocalyptic tradition into contemporary politics and culture, the atmosphere of post-9/11 America recalls the more recent cultural miasma of the 1950s and the Cold War—a historical period itself deeply concerned with the rhetoric of apocalypse and with overarching questions about the role of American identity in a global community. In each cultural period, conservative iterations of national identity have remained oriented toward the idea that, in resisting the threats facing America (whether commies or terrorists), the goal has seemingly been not only defense, but also the protection of a particular way of life.

Within this perspective, postapocalyptic science fiction, as a form entirely devoted to imagining possibilities for life after the end of the world, has become one of the most prominent sites in popular culture for the exploration of political, cultural and social life after 9/11. In the repeated images of ruined cities and desolated landscapes that have featured so prominently in popular culture over the last years, in the figures of monsters and infected bodies that have found their creeping way into everything from film to television to automobile advertisements, postapocalyptic science fiction has become a way to both begin to make sense of the traumatized history of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and imagine ways to disentangle the practice of community from the binary of good and evil. In this way, postapocalyptic science fiction of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century

echoes that of the long 1950s, and carries on a critical project begun in earnest by the science fiction writers and directors of that cultural period.<sup>2</sup>

As a genre that has come to pervade everyday life, postapocalyptic science fiction offers audiences the chance to imagine a means of working through the traumas of the past and toward the hope of discovering new possibilities for the future (Wegner 7; Berger 19). If the traditional apocalyptic imagination—as it appears in both the Christian tradition and in certain conservative iterations of American politics—is fundamentally concerned with the distinction between “good” and “evil,” postapocalyptic science fiction regularly complicates this dichotomy and deconstructs the distinction between self and other as a way of privileging a vision of identity and community as intertwined notions, each reciprocally dependent on the other. Nowhere is this deconstruction of “normal” identity more apparent than in the treatment of the heroic male in postapocalyptic science fiction.

This study, then, is about representations of identity and community produced in postapocalyptic science fiction since the events of 11 September 2001. In the popular imagination, representations of identity and community are continually situated within social, cultural and political norms of embodiment, gender practices and power relationships, and they are often elaborated through attention to highly normalized figures—the citizen, the family, the civic group, the suburban neighborhood organization. If postapocalyptic science fiction deconstructs the boundaries between identity and difference that are so important in traditional apocalyptic stories, it often does so through imagining alternative (non-normative) representations of the figure of the heroic male and elaboration this figure’s interaction with

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<sup>2</sup> For an extended discussion of the apocalyptic imagination in 1950s American science fiction, see Booker.

others in community. In the American apocalyptic imagination, the heroic masculine protagonist, so often the symbol of a biopolitically normal life, becomes charged with negotiating the challenge of maintaining a stable (and static) identity in the midst of a world that has radically changed. Like the cultural figure of the cowboy, this idealized apocalyptic protagonist is expected to face the end of the world, as well as set that world to rights, without enduring any lasting change to his understanding of his own identity or masculinity (Kimmel, *History* 94). In this figure, the construction of identity and community is closely related to the maintenance of the idealized male body and of a particular kind of masculinity.

The tendency of many apocalyptic narratives to reaffirm an idealized identity in the equally idealized body of their heroic protagonists is often apparent in science fiction and disaster cinema from the 1950s, 60s and 70s, such as the sequence of Charlton Heston films that includes *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970) and *The Omega Man* (1971). The clearest examples of the symbolic importance of the masculine hero, however, are to be found in the action films of the 1980s. While postapocalyptic/cyberpunk films like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) became increasingly critical of conservative-capitalist America, apocalyptic ideology found its best expression in mainstream cinema, in the ultra-violent action flicks that featured the hypermasculine bodies of actors like Chuck Norris, Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. As James Berger notes, 1980s action films exercised "an urgent need to see violent culminations over and over...every popular film [contained] some mini-apocalypse, some payoff of absolute destruction—of cars, airplanes, helicopters, buildings, cities, along with their flimsy human occupants" (xiii). And alongside such visions of destruction, these action heroes regularly fought, shot and blasted their way through unbeatable odds. When the dust settled, these men had been avenged, vindicated and accorded a value ostensibly equal to their

gender and station. Whatever had threatened them—their bodies as much as their way of life—had been utterly destroyed. At the base of such violent narratives is a vision of apocalyptic masculine identity that is at once imperiled and utterly immune to danger.

It is precisely this vision of masculine identity that is deconstructed in many postapocalyptic narratives. Indeed, in many examples of postapocalyptic science fiction, identity is not treated as something ahistorical or immune to change. Rather, in works like Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954)—the novel at the core of this study—the masculine identity of the heroic protagonist is both contingent and contextual, conditioned by and dependent upon a relationship to others. In turn, when such men fail to measure up to the idealized standards of apocalyptic identity—in other words, when they recognize the limits of their individual perspective and allow themselves to engage with others who are different—they are often met with unexpected opportunities for the practice of community. Since 9/11, postapocalyptic fiction has repeatedly offered alternatives to the apocalyptic masculine identity that has seemed both dominant in American culture and ubiquitous in American politics (Kimmel, *History* 1-10). Such alternatives coalesce around the belief that identity is not static but rather continually imbricated in the lives of others and in a shared history. In other words, such stories promote the idea that the masculine self exists best as a part of community.

I intend the term community to refer, first of all, broadly to the mechanisms of organization that allow individuals to conceive of themselves as members of a group, or series of groups, delimited by such classical categories as class, race, gender and sexuality, as well as religious and political affiliations or various regional and geographic factors. Traditionally, the community is directly associated with the family, the church and the state, among other things. Moreover, especially in the context of late capitalist life (happening more and more now in a

virtual world), individuals may identify as members of groups based on a range of market affiliations and lifestyle preferences—hobbies, tastes, fashion choices, entertainment preferences, particular sexual practices or any number of options taken from an adaptive, responsive and ever-evolving menu of choices. In this way, there is never a single community but many instances of the practice of community, evolving out of the inevitable negotiation of individual identities into larger sets of communal identifications. This is not to say, however, that dominant instances of community do not always inhere in the practice of everyday life. In any given social, cultural or political context, there exist dominant norms of identification that give rise to hegemonic ways of life and, subsequently, hegemonic articulations of community that are intensely consequential, both for those who belong and those who are excluded.<sup>3</sup>

In postapocalyptic science fiction, the practice of community is contingent on the construction and regulation of identities. Identity is a term that ultimately refers to the sum of the ideologies that create and govern individual subjectivity (Williams 133-36). A loose and fraught term, identity addresses the myriad ideologies through which a person comes to imagine their relationship to others, on levels ranging from the biological to the spiritual. Identity has been theorized from a hundred perspectives, but at the center of each is the concept of imagination—identity is conferred over time both by how a person imagines themselves to be and by how they come to be imagined by others in any number of social, cultural, political, economic or juridical circumstances. As critics Margaret Wetherell, Valerie Hey, and Stephen Reicher parse it, “The concept of identity has had a long and chequered history... Who we are is always complicated—a matter of social classifications, shifting social categorisations and group memberships, and a matter, too, of the ways in which social and cultural materials are organised as psychology and

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<sup>3</sup> For extended definitions of the concepts of identity and community, see Blackshaw.

taken on as personal projects” (viii). Identity is, first of all, social, cultural and political—categories of identification all given meaning by historical realities—and it is invariably imagined differently by each person depending on a matrix of gender, race, class and sexuality. Moreover, concepts of identity are often complicated by the fact that the term refers to the collective as often as it does the individual.

In apocalyptic myth, in particular, identity is most often imagined at the level of the group rather than at the level of the individual (Cohn, *Pursuit* 19). In this way, belonging becomes an extension of individual identity onto a map of collective existence. Such is also the case in instances where national identity is invoked: “the nation-state has the ability to cultivate an outside form of belonging as a way of maintaining a coherent sense of national identity, rooted in the consciousness of individuals, who in the same way identify with an imagined national narrative” (Blackshaw 6). By extension, the same may be true of smaller collectives, whether cast culturally, socially, politically or in terms of biology, race, sexual orientation—the list could go on ad infinitum. More to the point, identity structures experience at the intersection of the self with community, and the dominant norms of identity in a given situation confer power on some while disadvantaging others—thus, the relations of power between different identities assert influence on the limits and possibilities of community. In postapocalyptic science fiction, this dynamic plays into the construction of representations of alternative identities and alternative communities.

The term community also has a second meaning. For many of the masculine protagonists featured in postapocalyptic fiction, the term community applies to something more abstract than simply social, cultural or political mechanisms of belonging—it refers, rather, to the instance in which (known) identity touches (unknown) difference. This touching in turn hints at the

possibility of alternative ways of belonging in relationship with others. While several of the works I discuss below do not go so far as to imagine new iterations of community, many explore the moment in which a stoic masculine identity gives way to difference and to change. In this fashion, the moment of change offers a (utopian) promise of community, one that may never be fully realized but whose very existence challenges the notion that the limits of identity and community can ever be mastered or absolutely stable. In imagining such moments of radical change—moments that often look like failure from the dominant point of view—postapocalyptic science fiction offers a means to explore the value of community, of life that happens with and in relationship to others.

In the aftermath of 9/11, debates about the meaning of community have been integral to the construction and regulation of the American national narrative, and this narrative has repeatedly intersected with a politics of fear and with the conservative rhetoric of the war on terror. Despite the importance of community in everyday life, however, received ideas of community have gone largely unquestioned in public discourses, ranging from international politics to news media representations of the 9/11 attacks.<sup>4</sup> By repeatedly invoking such representations of 9/11, postapocalyptic science fiction offers a space in the cultural imagination for disentangling the various meanings, limits and promises of community in a post-9/11 context, and through an enduring attention to disrupted normal identities, postapocalyptic science fiction has offered images of alternative possibilities for community. Phillip Wegner writes, “one of the most pressing projects of our contemporary moment is that of the invention of new imaginaries of radical political agency, of figures that appear, from the perspective of ruling order, as

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Žižek’s argument in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* that one consequence of 9/11 was “an unprecedented strengthening of American hegemony, in all its aspects” such that definitions of community were reduced to simple binaries between the terrorists and the western, civilized world (144).

monsters” (14). In the images of masculine protagonists who touch difference and fail to remain unchanged a postapocalyptic science fiction presents images of men who become not only such monsters, but also monsters in common.

Representations of community cannot be imagined apart from representations of individual identities. Hegemonic masculinity is a category of identification deeply imbricated in negotiations of community, and the concept of the monster is fundamental to identifying the limits of the “normal” embodied self. This relationship, between man and monster, in turn, is traditionally foundational to the articulation of the normal community. While the literary and cinematic history of the monster includes a variety of female or hybrid-gendered monsters, my focus here is on the masculine hero and the masculine monster as opposing elements in the construction of the biopolitical status quo. In the popular imagination, as in many other contexts, the masculine hero serves as the preeminent figure for a biopolitical norm (normal in terms of both biological health and political identity) that can be properly recognized by law, properly governed and properly integrated into social, cultural and political life without disrupting the existing order of everyday life (Esposito, *Bios* 13-15). The monster, on the other hand, becomes a figure for all those who fail to remain properly recognizable within that order. In postapocalyptic science fiction, in particular, the healthily embodied man—a figure who remains heroically normal despite the disruption of the world around him—stands in symbolic opposition to the monster, whose alien, diseased and infected body comes to represent the violent disruption of the status quo (Forth 8-9; Cohen 4-6; Sontag, *Disaster* 40-41). In this symbolic matrix, in which the concepts of disease and infection intersect with discourses of masculinity and monstrosity, cultural representations of man and monster have a direct bearing on how identity



and community are conceived on the level of imagination and defined as either normal or deviant.

The influence of these representations on the political imagination, for instance, are visible in American political life after 11 September, 2001. As numerous critics have argued, the events of 9/11 occasioned a violent resurgence in both politics and mainstream media of conservative and nostalgic visions of collective American identity, and, in response to the sense of vulnerability evoked by 9/11, many in America subsequently adopted a political perspective that emphasized a binary (if exceedingly abstract) relationship between “us” and “them” as a means of accounting for the instability and uncertainty that accompanied public life after 9/11. Such a perspective has arguably not been credible since the 1980s, yet it was again widely taken up on both political and religious fronts, to the detriment of everyone who found themselves outside the bounds of dominant definitions of a “normal life.”

Relying on fraught terms such as “terrorist,” “axis of evil,” and “enemy of freedom,” conservative appraisals of 9/11 have repeatedly invoked a series of political abstractions intended to intensify the distance between those who can be identified as belonging to the community (insofar as “community” here denotes an American or at least Western sensibility and way of life) and those whose difference and exclusion is visible in their skin color or dress or their practice of everyday life. Such appraisals represent a tactical throwback to Cold War rhetoric that insisted on the fundamental distinction between “American” and “un-American” ways of life. On the other hand, thinkers on the left, many of whom worked to highlight the damaging material consequences of such political abstraction and reductivism, have stringently opposed

arguments that insist on imagining irresolvable differences between “us” and “them.”<sup>5</sup> Many have, furthermore, rightly pointed out the ways in which such abstract perspectives too easily function to legitimize (quite real) state violence in the service of military action and governmental intervention (Esposito, *Bios* 3-12; Butler, *Precarious* 1-15).

Judith Butler, for instance, argues that debates over personhood and identity since 9/11 have witnessed an “ever-increasing ambiguity introduced by the very use of the term ‘terrorist,’ which is then exploited by various powers at war...” (*Precarious Life* 4). The very word, it would seem, is enough to legitimize violence toward others who fall outside a stringently defined set of (bio)political ideals, even while the lived consequences of such violence become increasingly invisible. As Butler goes on to point out, “The articulation of [such a politics] takes place in part through producing a consensus on what certain terms will mean, how they can be used, and what lines of solidarity are implicitly drawn through this use” (*Precarious Life* 4). In such a situation, where attention to the “lines of solidarity” between identity and difference has become so intense, imagining forms of community or togetherness that go beyond the status quo has proven a difficult, but not impossible task.

Often, the first step toward imagining new opportunities for the practice of community has to do with first reimagining the basic relationship between self and other. Indeed, imagining new options for community has become all the more important in the context of post-9/11 life. This task has been widely taken up, both by the cultural producers behind many of the most popular postapocalyptic narratives and by a range of critical theorists. Roberto Esposito, whose philosophical work on the reciprocal relationship between identity/immunity and community/contagion has done much to shed light on biopolitical configurations of belonging,

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<sup>5</sup> See for example the collection of essays, *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays After September 11*.

argues, “Nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community; nothing more necessary, demanded, and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms” (*Communitas* 1). Indeed, in the apocalyptic atmosphere of post-9/11 political life, the intensity with which ideals of national identity have been defended has served to amplify a range of defensive strategies protecting “the homeland”—strategies that glibly conflate a saccharine patriotism with an increase in state surveillance.

Many others have echoed the urgency and difficulty of imagining any version of community that is different than the contemporary status quo. In *After Theory*, Terry Eagleton suggests that in the pursuit of community and belonging, “There can be no falling back on ideas of collectivity which belong to a world unraveling before our eyes. Human history is now for the most part both post-collectivist and post-individualist” (21). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, describe the present in equally paradoxical terms: “We can already recognize that today time is split between a present that is already dead and a future that is already living—and the yawning abyss between them is becoming enormous” (356). Indeed, in the wake of 9/11, it has seemed both difficult and vitally important to imagine a meaningful relationship between individual and communal life, as well as to imagine meaningful options for opening up the relationship between identity and difference in ways that might produce new configurations of belonging.

It is in this context that postapocalyptic science fiction offers a space for imagining community, as well as for exploring the limits and possibilities of the relationship between identity and difference, man and monster. Even as the meaning of community has rarely been addressed in the dominant national narrative of 9/11—or has been treated reductively as a construction synonymous with national identity—postapocalyptic science fiction has served as a

site for the unfolding of an alternative narrative, one that imagines the relationship between identity and difference in the tenor of something other than fear. As Corey Robin argues, in response to the 9/11 attacks, the experience of political fear became a key part of everyday American life (1-2). Robin writes, “Though most modern writers and politicians oppose political fear as the enemy of liberty, reason, and other Enlightenment values, they often embrace it, in spite of themselves, as a source of political vitality...they see opportunities for collective renewal in the fear of these evils...Political fear is supposed to teach us the worth of specific political values” (4).

Recent postapocalyptic narratives address the presence of political fear in everyday life, but fear is never the ascendant emotion or motivating factor in such stories. Rather, the kinds of community imagined in many postapocalyptic stories are created out of a desire for connection and an insistence on historical consciousness.<sup>6</sup> James Berger argues that there is a sense in everyday [American] life that “the ceaseless activity of our time—the news with its procession of almost indistinguishable disasters—is only a complex form of stasis” (xiii). A life ruled by fear, in other words, is bereft of a sense of meaning (and bereft of the historical imagination that motivates individuals to think or hope beyond themselves). One of the key values transmitted by postapocalyptic science fiction is the desperate need for just such a historical awareness, one that foregrounds the idea that human choices at present have a bearing on human life in the future.

In this way, many examples of postapocalyptic fiction take up the task laid out by Eagleton, who writes, “If this [situation] feels like a vacuum, it may also present an opportunity. We need to imagine new forms of belonging, which in our kind of world are bound to be multiple, rather than monolithic” (*After Theory* 21). Debates over the meaning(s) of 9/11 and

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Wegner’s extended discussion of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in *Life Between Two Deaths*.

“new forms of belonging” have become a part everyday life in so many ways that it sometimes feels as if what has unfolded in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has become a postapocalyptic story in its own right, with so many struggling to find a way to either recover what was seemingly lost or to discover new ways of life that are able to take into account a newfound awareness of the global nature of community.<sup>7</sup> In this context, the particular tropes and figures of postapocalyptic science fiction have offered perhaps the clearest means of articulating not only the risks but also the promises of communal life in the ruins—what Phillip Wegner has elsewhere called “new monstrous forms of collectivity” (*Life* 15). In this way, postapocalyptic science fiction answers a very real need in the American imagination: as Jenny Wolmark puts it, “Change is not just about the alteration of material circumstances alone, since possibilities for change have to be imagined before they can be enacted” (4).

Though postapocalyptic science fiction has played an important role in the cultural life of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a narrative form, it has roots that extend far beyond the events of 9/11. Indeed, postapocalyptic science fiction has long served as a means of bridging the gap between imagination and the practice of everyday life. Inasmuch as it employs the mechanisms of cognitive estrangement and extrapolation, postapocalyptic science fiction is best understood as a form of critical allegory (Wegner 6-15). The figure of the wasteland, as it is imagined in so many postapocalyptic texts, lends itself to the exploration of identity and community in the process of change, just as it foregrounds the importance of conceiving of these ideas as historically constructed. Within this context, the attention paid in many postapocalyptic narratives to the suffering of the male body offers a starting point for imagining community differently by first closely interrogating the defensive strategies that maintain and defend normative masculine

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<sup>7</sup> See James Berger’s argument about the “pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility of recent American culture” (xix) in *After the End*.

identity. Imagining change on this level hints at change on the much larger and more consequential level of national community. In this way, stories of the wasteland offer a means to think critically about the limits and promises of the present situation and to begin to imagine possibilities for change, first on the level of identity, then on the level of community.

Wegner explains the importance of allegorical narratives in this way: “Allegories enable complex or abstract historical processes to take on concrete form. Indeed, allegories often offer figurations of these historical movements before the emergence of a more proper conceptual or theoretical language.” Such stories, Wegner continues, are particularly valuable because “Allegorical representations also have the capacity to condense different historical levels and conflicts into a single figure, enabling a kind of relational thinking that is not as readily available in other forms of expression” (*Life* 6-7). In the social, cultural and political disruption that followed 9/11, postapocalyptic narrative—in the wasteland and in the monstrous and displaced figures that people it—has become an important space in popular culture for imagining the future of belonging amongst people who are living with the memory of disaster. Thus, in what follows, I conceive of each text’s treatment of the masculine hero—his ability to either remain static or to open to meaningful (monstrous) change—as a locus of the critical meaning(s) of postapocalyptic science fiction as an alternative narrative to a wider American apocalyptic imagination.

Seen from a historical perspective, postapocalyptic science fiction reveals a longstanding tradition of calling the status quo into question. As such, postapocalyptic narratives, in ways that become increasingly pronounced during and after the long 1950s,<sup>8</sup> have often served as a means

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<sup>8</sup> Booker defines the long 1950s as the culturally distinct period in American history between 1945-1964, a periodization that includes the initial social, cultural and political reactions to the historical trauma of World War II. In particular, Booker marks the ways in which the popular culture of this era mapped out the effects of the atomic bomb (as apocalyptic an event as any) on the American imagination. See Booker 1-5.

of imagining possibilities for changing the social, cultural and political structures associated with normative embodiment, gender practices and other constructs of identification. Working from this perspective, I take into account the important figurative role that representations not only of the wasteland, but also of the body—particularly heroic, masculine and monstrous bodies—play in articulating both individual and collective structures of identity. If the traditional hero (typically male and often hyper-masculine) serves as an allegorical figure for the values and fate of a given community, and the traditional monster is his foil and foe,<sup>9</sup> many examples of postapocalyptic science fiction intentionally deconstruct this relationship in order to call into question the relationship between identity and difference in general at to offer alternative ways of valuing the influence of difference on a given identity.

Postapocalyptic science fiction offers alternative ideas about what it means to live in community, all while offering different (and often better) ways of imagining the role difference might play in the construction of a meaningful life. While always acknowledging the lived historical traumas that color that life, postapocalyptic science fiction imagines a world that moves beyond the end, into the possibilities and promises of the unknown. Read as allegories of social, cultural and political change, postapocalyptic narratives tell the story of the present recovered as a moment of possibility.<sup>10</sup>

In the postapocalyptic narratives I discuss throughout this study, change is imagined on the local as well as the global level. However, such changes are first of all visible on a much smaller scale—the scale of the individual body. Ranging from zombie flicks and television

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<sup>9</sup> The foundational text in this regard is Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

<sup>10</sup> In this way, postapocalyptic narratives engage with the overall project of science fiction discussed by Darko Suvin: "SF sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique [and] changeable...SF [moves] into the sphere of anthropological and cosmological thought, becoming a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and—most important—a mapping of possible alternatives. See *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* 7-12.

serials like *28 Days Later* (2002) and *The Walking Dead* (2010) to literary fiction such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) or Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2012), stories of the wasteland are everywhere peopled with images of bodies in ruin, in pain and in various states of dispossession. In a way, the body in postapocalyptic science fiction typically becomes monstrous—sometimes in obvious ways, through disease or zombie bite, and sometimes in more subtle ways, by refusing normalized gender practices or bodily performances in favor of modes of life better suited to living in the wasteland. Many of the texts I examine throughout this study feature male protagonists who transgress the boundaries of normative masculine identity, either because they willingly choose to do so or because they find they have no choice. In this way, these texts subvert the traditional opposition of man and monster, choosing instead to treat the monster as a map of possible alternatives. Once outside the boundaries of bodily and gender norms, the fates of these protagonists vary widely, but what remains surprisingly constant is the fact that leaving “normal” behind nearly always offers unexpected possibilities for developing meaningful connections with others.

Postapocalyptic narratives since 1945 have increasingly deconstructed the binary relationship between man and monster as a means of criticizing conservative and nostalgic visions of identity and instead promoting the value of connection over the value of defense. Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) is a foundational novel in this sense, and it serves as a starting point for my discussion of the alternative masculine protagonist featured in many recent postapocalyptic narratives. In Matheson's story, the traditional relationship between man and monster is entirely inverted, and the efforts of protagonist Richard Neville to protect his own status quo against change prove to be intensely violent and destructive—in the end, he becomes the only monster worth fearing (Moreland 81). That Neville's efforts are closely related to his



sense of normative masculinity is not coincidental, nor is Matheson's attention to the fact that Neville's adherence to these norms of gender and embodiment promulgates an intense violence that affects both those who threaten Neville and, ultimately, his own body and psyche.

By tracing the failure of an individual identity—Robert Neville's own middle-class, white, male subjectivity—Matheson manages to trace the failure of an entire society, as well as of an entire notion of what constitutes normal community. In a way that recalls Eagleton's claim that a direct line connects the body and “such apparently abstract matters as reason, justice and morality” (*Ideology* 208), *I Am Legend* sets the stage for a genealogy of postapocalyptic fiction that imaginatively collapses the distance between the figures of the heroic masculine protagonist and the monster in order to explore alternative ways of constructing identity and valuing difference. It is only when Neville recognizes the extent of his failure that he is again able to conceive of a meaningful connection to others. In this way, *I Am Legend* is a starting point for a genealogy of postapocalyptic fiction that values connection and community above protection and static identity. This text, arguably more than any other, has influenced the ways in which postapocalyptic science fiction is both produced and received in contemporary popular culture. Moreover, the novel codifies a critique of normative heroic masculinity that sees a direct connection between practices of bodily and gender identity and practices of community. *I Am Legend* is arguably one of the most important works of postapocalyptic fiction after 1945, and Matheson's critique of hegemonic masculinity and normative visions of community surfaces repeatedly in any number of places, from the zombie cinema of George Romero to the horror fiction of Stephen King, and beyond (Moreman 130; Moreland 78).

In the past decade, postapocalyptic science fiction has appeared in a range of places, and, as Wegner points out, “science fiction and its various generic kin” (such as fantasy and horror)

have been a significant means of imagining new options for belonging (14). Focusing on postapocalyptic science fiction, I pay attention to two significant modes of such stories—zombie fiction and dystopian fiction. There is, in each of these genres, a great deal of overlap with the primary concerns of postapocalyptic science fiction, and each addresses in its own way the concerns of disease and infection that underwrite the relationship between man and monster. In zombie films, for instance, the zombie plague is nearly always imagined as properly apocalyptic, changing everything about a society's way of life, from the level of bodily norms to the level of the population. Likewise, adventures that follow the survivors of such plagues are nearly always set in a postapocalyptic wasteland in which norms of government and social life are in flux. In turn, the suffocating and orderly mechanisms of governance imagined in dystopian fiction nearly always follow on the heels of apocalyptic disruption, and, in such stories, it is apocalyptic disaster that often gives the dystopian government the political momentum it needs to justify its oppressive regulatory practices.

Many postapocalyptic texts are unified by the language of disease and infection that plays a key role in articulating the complex and contradictory relationship between identity and difference. The trope of disease in postapocalyptic science fiction touches on the concept of identity at perhaps its most fundamental level, the level of the body, but it does not end there but rather extends to the ways in which community is often conceived on the level of the population as a body in its own right. Understood from the perspective of biopolitics, the health or disease of the community becomes the object of political power, and such power is exercised by regulating subjectivity in the space of the individual body (Foucault, *History* 142-43).

It is, ultimately, the figure of the normal body in peril that opens a space for exploring new ways of living in the wasteland. Moreover, in the context of a biopolitical society—one

marked by “a technology of power centered on life”—the influence of the concept of a “normal” identity intensifies (Foucault, *History* 144). As Foucault points out, “The law always refers to the sword. But a power whose task is to take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms. It is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of value and utility...around the norm” (*History* 144). In other words, if the object of biopolitical power is the organization and regulation of the life of the population—the community understood through a stark biological lens—the power of the norm (and of all normalizing discourse) is not only to identify proper life but also to allow for the identification of all improper life.<sup>11</sup>

The language of disease disturbs the boundaries of the norm because it is predicated on the images of infection, violation and incursion into the body by difference. As Susan Sontag points out, “Disease is seen as an invasion of alien organisms, to which the body responds by its own military operations, such as the mobilizing of immunological ‘defenses’” (*AIDS* 9). Inasmuch as disease offers a metaphor for the disruption of the body—and all bodily norms—it also serves as a figure for the disruption of the community from the level of body extending upward.

In order to understand the symbolic value of the figures of the masculine hero and the monster in postapocalyptic fiction after 9/11, I begin first of all by exploring the history of the genre in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Grounded in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1836), postapocalyptic science fiction reveals a longstanding concern with the intersection of the masculine body and normative identity, especially as that intersection is situated in the practice

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<sup>11</sup> For a full discussion of the relationship between “proper” and “improper” life in biopolitical society, see Timothy Campbell’s excellent *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben*.

of community. In the chapter, “Living in the Wasteland: The Limits and Promises of Community,” I examine the ways in which postapocalyptic science fiction emerges from the tradition of religious apocalyptic writing to become part of science fiction’s critical project of estrangement and social critique. At the same time, postapocalyptic science fiction preserves an attention to the body as a site of suffering and redemption, such that the fate of the community in the wasteland becomes imaginatively tied to the fate of the individual body.

After examining the history and terms of postapocalyptic science fiction, I turn in the next chapter to a discussion of Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*. In particular, Matheson’s well-crafted critique of 1950s normativity and heroic masculinity sets the stage for later works that also seek to call into question the importance of defending identity against difference in a desire to preserve the status quo or a particular way of life. Drawing on biopolitical articulations of immunity and community as developed by Donna Haraway and Roberto Esposito, I look closely at the ways in which the entangled discourses of embodiment, gender and disease are closely tied to Matheson’s interrogation of masculine identity and monstrous difference as the subtext of community. Indeed, my discussion of Matheson’s novel—and the three filmic adaptations of that novel—grounds the remainder of my argument (as well as my increasing attention to postapocalyptic film). In particular, I am driven by an interest in the ways in which Matheson’s critique of combative, heroic masculinity resurged to relevance after 9/11. Additionally, as I discuss at length, Matheson’s literary treatment of the zombie laid important groundwork for Romero’s filmic elaboration of that mythic figure, one that became, in the years after 9/11, the preeminent symbol for abject life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Keeping mind Matheson’s influence on contemporary zombie film, “Return to Normal: Negotiating Risk and Connection in the Zombie Apocalypse” examines the continuing

importance of the relationship between the hero and the monster in zombie cinema after *I Am Legend*, paying particular attention to the work of George Romero, the predominant zombie auteur of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the work of Danny Boyle, the director who resurrected the zombie after 9/11 (Zealand 239). I find that by continually calling into question the dominant ideals of traditional masculinity, many zombie narratives offer examples of protagonists who eschew the power and gender structures associated with the status quo in order to find new ways of connecting with others. As such, these narratives emphasize a growing desire for practices of community characterized a valuing of togetherness and difference, rather than by uniformity or security.

If Matheson's *I Am Legend* explicitly informs the development of the zombie genre, the novel also, in its emphasis on biopolitical iterations of community, tacitly addresses the genre of dystopian fiction. In "'Because You are Different': Dystopian Suffering and the Apocalyptic Body," I explore the correlation between postapocalyptic and dystopian narratives in order to examine the ways in which the fate of the individual body serves as a figure for the fate of the community. In particular, I look at Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* and Gilliam's self-conscious deconstruction of apocalyptic identity as an example of a postapocalyptic dystopian film in which the fate of the masculine protagonist seems marked by failure but instead opens onto possibilities for togetherness that accept the risk of choosing to be different. Connecting this film with other dystopian and postapocalyptic films, I look at the ways in which discourses of the body open onto debates over the future of governance and discipline in biopolitical life. In particular, the society Gilliam imagines in *Twelve Monkeys* is defined by the binary of security and risk, such that possibilities for meaningful connection between people living in that society are diminished to the point of absurdity. By choosing to eschew security in favor of meaningful

connection with others, protagonist James Cole (Bruce Willis), places his body at risk, loses his political and juridical identity, and invites intense suffering upon himself. Despite this, Gilliam's film seems to suggest his choice is the best among even more terrible options.

In the concluding chapter, "The Truth(s) of the Other: Escaping the Boundaries of the Same in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*," I end by discussing a recent South African science fiction film that leverages the concerns of postapocalyptic science fiction in order to explore the idea that the boundaries of normative masculinity, with its defensive attitude toward difference, are often destructive to the man fighting to "be normal," just as they are to those who are abject. In a way that unintentionally recalls *I Am Legend*, Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* casts heroic masculinity as a hindrance to a meaningful life. As I discuss, it is only when the protagonist of *District 9* has accepted his failure to live up to an idealized (late-capitalist) standard of masculine identity that he is able to recognize alternative possibilities for life among and in relationship to others. In connecting this film to the treatment of heroic masculinity in a long line of postapocalyptic narratives, I find a history of longing for a way to let go of normal and become monstrous, if being a monster means not being alone after the end of the world.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Living in the Wasteland: The Limits and Promises of Community

In the apocalyptic imagination, the transit of the body (politic) between suffering and salvation is intensely symbolic, to the point of becoming a cultural ritual. As Elana Gomel explains, “All apocalyptic and millenarian ideologies ultimately converge on the utopian transformation of the body (and the body politic) through suffering (406). Since 9/11, the suffering body has repeatedly figured in mass media and popular culture in ways that disturb the boundaries between fiction and reality, as images of dispossessed, diseased and suffering people have flooded in from any number of sources, infecting the news outlets and cinemas alike. In this context, attention to the suffering body in postapocalyptic fiction has offered a way to restore some semblance of meaning to such widespread suffering and make some sense of the fate of community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Postapocalyptic fiction presents the body in the context of the wasteland—the space that exists in the wake of catastrophe, either global or local and in which dominant codes of body and society are in flux. The bodies of the wasteland are marked by pain, loss, disease and disruption—they are, in many ways, the monsters of the wasteland, bodies in which boundaries between self and other, and between identity and difference become porous. Thus, representations of the body in such texts become metaphors for the formation and regulation of community—this is especially the case with representations of the highly normalized male body.

Postapocalyptic science fiction grows out of a long tradition of apocalyptic mythology fundamentally related to the construction of Christian religious identity (and it is this particular apocalyptic imagination that continues to inflect American politics and culture). Given its

connection to a tradition dedicated to imagining the final and absolute separation of the faithful from the damned, it is not surprising to find that postapocalyptic fiction reveals an abiding interest in themes of identity and difference. Postapocalyptic science fiction, however, addresses these themes quite differently than the apocalyptic tradition it both emerges from and responds against. In the apocalyptic imagination—especially as it is articulated in the Revelation of St. John<sup>12</sup>—imagining the end of the world is a gesture intended to reaffirm and protect a particular version of identity and, along with it, a particular ideal of community.

The apocalyptic tradition preserves a notion of community as essentially identical to a shared identity. The function of the imagined apocalypse is to define and defend this communal identity. According to James Berger, “[Apocalypse] is the eschaton, the actual imagined end of the world, as presented in the New Testament Apocalypse of John or other Jewish or early Christian apocalypses” (5). Norman Cohn places the origins of the apocalyptic myth in the teaching of Zoroaster (or Zarathustra), who—circa 1500 BCE—began to teach that “the world was not static, nor would it always be troubled. [Rather] the world was moving, through incessant conflict, toward a conflictless state,” one that would emerge after “a prodigious final battle” between the forces of good and evil (*Cosmos* 227). John R. Hall elaborates Zoroaster’s mythology: “Zarathustra’s ideas offered a basic matrix for the interpretation of earthly history in relation to cosmic struggle...[and] the apocalyptic expectation of the end of time and the postapocalyptic heavenly reward for the faithful are clearly in evidence in Zarathustra’s writings” (18-19). Herein lies the fundamental problem of the apocalyptic imagination: it exchanges an emphasis on human responsibility and historical process for an essentially fatalistic and transcendent view of community and identity, and it values an enduring vision of the end of

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<sup>12</sup> For a description of the importance of St. John’s Revelation in apocalyptic myth, see Rosen.



history as divine judgment and “heavenly reward.” In the apocalyptic tradition, Berger argues, “The apocalypse would be the definitive catastrophe—not only final and complete but absolutely clarifying...[it] would replace the moral and epistemological murkiness of life as it is with a post-apocalyptic world in which all identities and values are clear” (8). Whereas apocalyptic writing of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century often moved markedly away from such a generalizable formula, the religious narratives such as the Revelation of St. John support such a perspective—and it, in turn, is foundational to the Christian tradition that suffuses the American apocalyptic imagination.

Indeed, the Christian apocalyptic myth is highly invested in the defense of a particular iteration of identity. Elizabeth Rosen explains, “Apocalypse is a sense-making paradigm,” designed to impose meaning and order on an otherwise disordered environment (92). Cohn parses the ideological character of the apocalyptic myth in this way: “[Apocalyptic] prophecies were devices by which religious groups, at first Jewish and later Christian, fortified and asserted themselves when confronted by the threat or the reality of oppression” (*Pursuit* 19).

Acknowledge By positing the end of history as a divinely asserted and ordered utopia—an exclusive reward for the faithful—the apocalyptic myth imaginatively removes the necessity for the believer to engage with historical, social, cultural or political difference and change.

Apocalyptically oriented notions of community are implacably static and tied to reductive ideals of identity.

Moreover, the tradition of apocalyptic narrative often paradoxically combines a sense of present crisis with an expectation of renewal, liberation and reaffirmation. Indeed, the apocalyptic imagination is founded in the interplay between religion, fiction and politics, and in American popular culture, it comes to represent a contradictory ideology that informs discourses

of national identity and the perspectives on history that underwrite such discourses. As Lee Quinby argues, “Americans have been taught to reside in apocalyptic terror and count on millennial perfection...this imprecise yet overpowering belief system is a way of life” (2). Likewise, James Berger explains, “The American sense of apocalypse was from its beginning split into two contradictory senses...[a] sense of achieved, or at least potential, post-apocalyptic perfection coexisted in the developing American apocalyptic ideology with a violent terror of some darkness that both loomed outside and dwelled within” (133-34).

In terms of identity, such apocalyptic ideology tends to conceive of the relationship between self and other as a fixed point, a stable and transhistorical formation that, although constantly troubled and harried, remains immune to change. Berger also points out the ways in which apocalyptic thinking is particularly visible in the political ideology of the American right—a thinking embodied by Ronald Reagan, for whom America represented an “achieved utopia” (138). Berger writes, “In the view of the Reaganist or neo-Reaganist Right, the United States was perfect in its inception, has always been perfect, and is perfect today—or would be but for the efforts of identifiable enemies at home and abroad” (134).

What is especially notable about such static conceptions of national identity is that they become inevitably ahistorical and amnesiac, supporting a perspective on the relationship between the present cultural moment and its history that ultimately lacks the measure of skepticism and doubt necessary for social and political critique (Quinby 2; Berger 134). As was the case for Reaganism and its “gorgeous mechanisms of amnesia,” apocalyptic ideology often seeks to deny that historical trauma has any lasting consequences either for the articulation of national identity or the attitudes that define its relationship to the outside world (Berger xiv). Rather, such a perspective privileges a nostalgic vision of identity and community—much like the visions of

normativity that locate the emotional and ideological center of American conservatism, at least since Reagan, in a mythical vision of the 1950s: for Reaganist and neo-Reaganist thinkers, the 1950s embodied a halcyon time of social and political harmony, before the cultural disruptions of the 1960s and 1970s (Caputi 1-2; Berger 135). In the traditional (religiously inflected) apocalyptic imagination, then, a distinct separation exists between an idealized self and an equally abstracted other: the suffering and destruction associated with historical trauma only serves to strengthen and reveal an intrinsically stable identity—or so the story goes.

The tradition of science fiction, on the other hand, has long produced apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives that undercut the reductive perspective of the apocalyptic imagination, as it is often reified in conservative thinking. Postapocalyptic narrative, in particular, displays a critical attitude toward such received definitions of identity and community. Whereas the apocalyptic tradition treats identity and community as static, ahistorical formations, postapocalyptic fiction has, since its beginnings in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), often treated identity and community as ideas that are given meaning by historically contingent norms of culture, politics and embodiment. If the apocalyptic imagination offers comfort by imagining the transcendence of identity and community beyond the material boundaries of history and everyday life, postapocalyptic narratives tend to offer something far more estranging and disconcerting—a vision of the contradictions and limitations of the status quo.<sup>13</sup>

At the center of such narratives is the apocalyptic body, caught in the imaginative space between suffering and “an image of purity so absolute that it denies the organic messiness of life” (Gomel 405). For Gomel, the apocalyptic body is “a suffering body, a text written in the script of stigmata, scars, wounds, and sores” (405). However, in its incarnation in recent popular

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance Evan Calder Williams.

culture, the apocalyptic body is also often transcendent, stalwartly heroic and impervious to disaster, often emerging from the ruins of the old world stronger and more pure, as if cleansed by fire. At the intersection of desire, power and ideology, apocalyptic fiction often expresses a longing to rearrange the present in terms of a nostalgically remembered past. In her classic essay, “Nuclear Holocaust as Urban Renewal,” Martha Bartter explains that apocalyptic fiction often presents widespread catastrophe “both as obvious disaster and as secret salvation” (148). Bartter goes on to write, “This covert message is usually overlooked...but it powerfully influences our cultural subconscious” (148). Nowhere, perhaps, is this influence more apparent than in the expectations of redemption and liberation that invest the bodies of protagonists in apocalyptic and postapocalyptic fiction.

For instance, the nuclear holocaust fiction of the long 1950s repeatedly featured scenarios of wholesale disaster and destruction that mysteriously provided opportunities for the survivors to rise from the ruins of the world and rebuild it as they saw fit. Patrick B. Sharp explains this tendency in what he terms “nuclear frontier stories”:

[S]cience fiction writers challenged the official visions of future atomic war throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. They imagined that nuclear war would mean the collapse of civilization and a return to a brutal struggle for survival. However, many science fiction writers also drew on the imagery of the frontier—and its racist vision of savagery that threatened to swallow civilization—to romanticize their accounts of life after a nuclear war. With their emphasis on civilized white protagonists who were reborn through their confrontation with savagery, nuclear frontier narratives repeated the white supremacist formulation of American civilization. At the same time, the happy ending many nuclear frontier stories offered made nuclear war actually seem appealing (6-7).

Such narratives offer a fantasy of the apocalyptic body—so often heroic and male—that is able to emerge from suffering into salvation, saved not only from disaster but also from the confusing and complicated world that existed before the apocalypse.

Postapocalyptic visions of identity are very nearly opposite to those that belong to apocalyptic myth. Postapocalyptic narrative is distinguished from the apocalyptic tradition not only by its emphasis on the metaphorical space of the wasteland—in which bodies not only suffer but also change—but also by its tendency to privilege a different perspective on history. Where apocalyptic myth envisions the end of the world as a reward for the faithful, postapocalyptic narrative emphasizes the continuation of a material, human history in the ruins of the status quo. It is this generic trope that gives postapocalyptic narrative an essentially anti-apocalyptic quality. Furthermore, if the critical energies of apocalyptic myth are directed at the preservation and reinvigoration of a particular identity, the critical energies of postapocalyptic narrative, by and large, are directed at destabilizing the status quo and engaging audiences in the work of imagining alternatives to hegemonic ways of life.

This much is visible in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). Shelley's work is noteworthy for a variety of reasons, including the fact that it articulates several postapocalyptic tropes that endure in science fiction today. The novel employs the plague as extinction event motif and (as the title suggests) the last man narrative, both of which figure prominently in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*. In *The Last Man*, a mysterious disease gradually decimates the human population, while the mysteriously immune protagonist chronicles the event. Elana Gomel calls the story "a relentless countdown to extinction" in which the main theme is the "dissolution of identity" (413-14). Of the many remarkable things about Shelley's novel, perhaps one of the most telling is that, in the face of extinction and the utter loss of both identity and community, the narrative does not invoke divine redemption or transcendence. Indeed, Shelley's story treats history as resolutely human, and, in this way, sets the stage for postapocalyptic

narrative's subsequent treatment of social, cultural and political change—change that almost invariably touches the norms of identity and community.

Furthermore, Shelley's *The Last Man* reclaims the apocalyptic myth's imagination of disaster for social criticism. This project, in turn, continues in later works of disaster-oriented science fiction. After *The Last Man*, stories of the end of the world become less and less about eschatological visions of the future—what Gomel calls “some version of the crystalline New Jerusalem” (405)—and more about reflecting on the limits, promises and consequences of the present. Likewise, contemporary works of postapocalyptic fiction continue a long tradition of post-catastrophe narrative designed to challenge the status quo. If this tradition begins with Shelley, it owes much to subsequent works of fiction that further develop the motifs and concerns of Shelley's novel. Central among such texts are George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), Richard Jeffries' *After London* (1885) and, to some extent, H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898).<sup>14</sup>

Though postapocalyptic science fiction continues to thrive in the early 1900s, it rushes to the forefront of American popular culture in the long 1950s, after the atomic bomb made the prospect of global catastrophe seem less like fantasy than a distinctly possible reality (Booker 65). During this time, a number of important postapocalyptic narratives appear, each dealing in its own way not only with the anxieties associated with the atomic bomb and the Cold War, but also with the tensions introduced into everyday life by the rapid social, cultural and political changes happening in the wake of World War II. Each of these texts demonstrates the fact that,

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<sup>14</sup> In keeping with the fact that Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* essentially founded the genre of postapocalyptic science fiction, it is important to note that, although not discussed herein, the tropes and figures of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic science fiction have been extensively developed by feminist science fiction writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler and many others. For a discussion of the importance of apocalypse in feminist science fiction, see Roberts and Miller.

just as apocalyptic visions are intrinsically linked to a specific historical moment—as responses to disruptions in collective identity—postapocalyptic narratives also respond to historical disruption, albeit in a very different way. Postapocalyptic narratives “are simultaneously symptoms of historical trauma and attempts to work through them” (Berger 19). In this light, the allegorical capacity of postapocalyptic fiction offers a means to address traumatic events in history—events like 9/11, for instance—while also working to imagine better ways of life in the wake of that trauma.

It is for this reason that postapocalyptic narrative has endured as such a prominent cultural form since 9/11. Furthermore, its popularity—as both a symptom and a treatment—echoes the same trend in the popular culture of the long 1950s. If postapocalyptic narrative is an attempt to address, on the level of allegory, the limits and promises of community, it is important to note that it does so through a very specific attention to the representation of certain symbolic figures closely related to the concepts of identity and community—most notably the hero and the monster. At a more fundamental level still, attention to these figures is first of all an attention to representations of the masculine body and of embodiment.

The analysis of the body as a site of allegory, however, is not without contradiction. Miriam Fraser and Monica Greco suggest it is best to “regard the body as highly relevant to any theorisation of socially situated subjectivity” but also to “simultaneously problematise any notion that ‘the body’ can be thought of as a single and coherent conceptual entity” (3). This approach is particularly suited to the study of representations of embodiment in postapocalyptic science fiction—in these texts, bodies are dislocated, diseased and otherwise monstrous, but they simultaneously exist in relation to community (even if that community is an absented presence in the text, as is the case for much of Matheson’s *I Am Legend*). Indeed, postapocalyptic bodies are

anything but stable. Rather, bodies in these narratives are—like the wastelands they inhabit—in a state of flux and struggle.

Thus, rather than looking to essentialize the tropes and figures of the body in postapocalyptic science fiction, it is more accurate to track the ways in which bodies serve as difference engines, figuratively embodying the dialectics of identity and difference, self and other, individual and collective. Bodies in the wasteland open fissures in dominant codes of identity, embodiment and community and a proper analysis will seek to understand the dynamics of these fissures. In this way, I hope “[to log] the ways in which the body is a problem; and a problem in the positive sense—not just as an ‘obstacle,’ but as a vehicle for thought and action” (Osborne 192; qtd in Fraser & Greco 3).

Importantly, the body is a site for the functioning of ideology and power relationships—relationships that are, especially in the works discussed below, most often visible in terms of gender dynamics. The body—both male and female—is a map for the dominant, hegemonic norms that make the present the veritable wasteland it is described as above. However, the body also has the capacity to resist, disrupt and call into question the functioning of these power relations. Foucault explains, “The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (*Discipline* 25). Indeed, as Foucault goes on to say, “this knowledge and mastery constitute what might be called the political technology of the body” (*Discipline* 26). For Foucault, as for many others who rely on Foucault’s theories of knowledge/power dynamics, biopower and biopolitical production, recognizing the technologies of power at work on the body is a fundamental first step toward reading the body against power,



as a map of possible avenues of freedom and resistance. Theorizing the body first as a site of power and ideology opens onto the genuinely disruptive and critical capacities of the body.

If the figure of the masculine hero is central to postapocalyptic narrative as critical allegory, the figure of the monster is equally important. Traditionally, the monster is a figure for the disruption of community, a figure that, once expunged, serves to revitalize the identity of the community. Georges Canguilhem explains, “The monster is not simply a living being of diminished value; it is a living being whose value is that of a foil. By revealing the stability to which life had habituated us to be precarious...the monster confers on...the success of structuration a value that is all the higher for the fact that we now grasp its contingency” (188). This scenario is available in stories as old and older than *Beowulf*. For instance, vanquishing Grendel and his mother not only proves the heroic nature of Beowulf but also importantly returns Hrothgar’s people to community in Heorot. The appearance and subsequent defeat of the monster affirms the identity of the community. Still, the mother is an even more troubling monster. Her defeat not only affirms the community but also seems to promise an end to the (re)production of that which disturbs the identity of the community. In this light, the monster always takes on an abject (and gendered) countenance.

As in *I Am Legend*, the concept of failure is also intrinsically a part of postapocalyptic narrative. Almost by definition, stories of the wasteland are stories about failure, stories in which the status quo has been catastrophically disrupted in some way. Such is the case in George Gordon Lord Byron’s proto-postapocalyptic poem, *Darkness* (1816), in which the poet imagines the death of the entire human race after the collapse of the sun. In the aftermath, one social, cultural, or political institution after another fails—social mores, religion, government—until only darkness, literal and metaphorical, remains. Likewise, in Shelley’s *The Last Man*, the

epidemic that slowly destroys human kind removes any possibility of community. In these two works, the failure of the status quo is properly apocalyptic, revealing the contingency and instability of life as usual. The world after the end is rarely so entirely negative as in *Darkness* or *The Last Man*. In many postapocalyptic narratives, in the wake of apocalyptic failure comes the opportunity to imagine alternative ways of being in the world.

Cast this way, the kinds of failure imagined in many postapocalyptic narratives echo the notion of failure put forward by Judith Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam argues that the experience of failure offers a way to think critically about what Leslie Fiedler has elsewhere called the tyranny of the normal.<sup>15</sup> In other words, it offers a means of recognizing the collateral damage incurred in the relentless pursuit of success, as it is measured by normative (late-capitalist) standards (*Queer* 1-4). Failure to measure up to an idealized standard can even be a rewarding experience, an idea borne out in many feminist apocalyptic and postapocalyptic stories of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>16</sup> Halberstam writes:

What kinds of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. (*Queer* 3)

Failure, parsed another way, is akin to Julia Kristeva's discussion of the abject—that which “disturbs identity, system, order” (4)—and it speaks to the ways in which any system of identification must exclude anything so different as to be unrecognizable by the standards of the social, cultural, or political status quo.

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<sup>15</sup> See Fiedler, *Tyranny of the Normal: Essays on Bioethics, Theology and Myth*.

<sup>16</sup> See also Roberts' discussion of feminist apocalypses in *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction*.

The mechanisms of such exclusion are very often intensely violent. And such violence is visible in the traditional relationship between the hero and the monster. As in Russ Castronovo's evocative notion of *necro citizenship*, "Death...structures political life in terms of aversion as well as desire" (1). The figure of the traditional, masculine hero not only symbolizes the biopolitical norms of everyday life, but also stands as a signal for the culturally normalized relationship between identity and difference—what might be cast as the *proper* relationship to historical change. The figure of the monster, on the other hand, exists to challenge the status quo, to habitually make visible the abject aspects of normalized identity. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it, "The monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (6). Likewise, many of the bodily figures featured in recent postapocalyptic fiction tend to challenge the status quo by revealing a certain freedom in failing to measure up or to be recognizable within the status quo.

Peter Paik has argued that recent postapocalyptic science fiction offers American audiences just this experience of failure. Other nations, he points out, have in their history an experience of conquest or decline that becomes a fundamental aspect of their collective identity; Americans, by contrast, have no such experience and therefore have never learned a vital lesson about history: "the rather obvious truth that no country or people remains ascendant forever, that the process of decline is an unavoidable part of history. Power, wealth, and influence, as well as social stability and strategic initiative, are finite quantities that dissipate and vanish over time" ("Why are Apocalyptic Narratives So Popular"). In the absence of such historical experience, postapocalyptic science fiction offers an imaginative approximation and "serves as a kind of groping in the dark for a lesson that other peoples have already learned" (Paik "Why are

Apocalyptic Narratives So Popular”). This lesson, of course, does much to weaken the boundaries between “us” and “them” that are so important in conservative appraisals of 9/11.

In the wake of 9/11, moreover, the dominant national narrative greeted the specter of a failed national defense (necessarily an experience of vulnerability) with a politics of fear, one that echoed in complex ways the traditional binary of man and monster. Moreover, such fear gives rise to a conservative political perspective that thrives on emphasizing the separation between identity and difference (a perspective ensconced in the abstract politicalized language of the war on terror, as in the phrase, “the axis of evil”). In the abstraction of such language, moreover, the material consequences of violence take on ideological values that subsequently reinforce political fear and the perceived distinction between self and other.

In a social, cultural, and political environment ruled by fear and ambiguity, the body tends to disappear as an object of concern, hidden by the abstract and often arbitrary processes that seek to delineate between “man” and “monster.” Within this horizon, postapocalyptic science fiction serves as an avenue for mapping the effects of such political abstractions on everyday life and on the everyday thinking of community. In a way, postapocalyptic science fiction’s enduring attention to the materiality of the body, to its suffering and vulnerability, marks a desire to make real and visible once more the severe consequences of the nostalgic binary opposition between “us” and “them,” between “civilization (our own) and barbarism” that has held sway in American norms of community since 9/11 (Butler, *Precarious Life 2*). By deconstructing the traditional relationship between the heroic protagonist and the monster, postapocalyptic science fiction serves to call into question the efficacy of political perspectives that insist on emphasizing “natural” differences between self and other.

That such a critique happens on the level of the popular imagination does not detract from its importance—changing the ways in which a society imagines the body and the self will ultimately have consequences for the ways in which that society imagines others who are different. In mapping a connection between the body and politics, postapocalyptic science fiction engages with contemporary questions of biopolitics. As Sherryl Vint writes,

The concept of biopolitics emerges from Michel Foucault’s work on biopower and his analysis of the increasing turn of governance toward the bodies of citizens since the late seventeenth century. For Foucault, biopower has two interrelated objects of governance: the disciplined body of the individual subject and the managed citizenry, conceived on the aggregate level of the population (“Science Fiction and Biopolitics” 161).

Within the perspective of biopolitics, the contiguity of identity and difference at the level of the body is reciprocally related to the relationship between the individual and the community at the level of the population. As such, the body becomes an important object of governance, given its capacity to disrupt the functioning of government on a larger scale.

The disruptive power of the body in relationship to identity and governance is, of course, captured in Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorization of the grotesque. The grotesque body, he writes, “is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26). In other words, the grotesque body, as well as the grotesque population, refuses to adhere to the boundaries set for it by discipline or governance—it continues to evolve, even if governmental and political norms lag behind.<sup>17</sup> In *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, Foucault writes, “For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death” (135). However, as various biological knowledges have become more and more entangled with political ones, the focus of sovereign power, and of discipline, has shifted: “One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (138,

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<sup>17</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

emphasis original). As Foucault and many others have made clear, the biopolitical governance of life inheres in the production of social, cultural, and political norms of identity and difference, and such norms always, either immediately or eventually, come to affect the ways in which bodies are identified as normal or abnormal, healthy or diseased, legitimate or illegitimate, legal or alien—any number of binary divisions that subsequently cultivate power over the body, over community, and over entire populations.<sup>18</sup>

In this context, representations of monstrous and masculine embodiment in postapocalyptic science fiction speak to pressing questions of identification on a rather large scale and offer a forum for negotiating the demands of identity and community in an increasingly biopolitical environment. As Sherryl Vint argues, “In a biocultural age, understanding the speculative discourses of biopolitics is imperative, and sf is in a privileged position to help us think through its anxieties and contradictions” (“Science Fiction and Biopolitics” 161). At a time when questions of biology and politics exert direct pressure on everyday life, science fiction (and particularly postapocalyptic science fiction) serves as a testing ground for the possibilities and limits of identity in biopolitical society, whether by exploring the freedom to be found “outside the bounds” of normal or by offering images of alternative ways of engaging with others who are different.

In the texts discussed below, engaging with difference is never without risk. One possible response to such risk is to redouble efforts to defend the status quo—to increase immunity, to borrow a term from Roberto Esposito’s discussion of biopolitical identity. For Esposito, the concept of immunity offers a metaphor that encapsulates the entirety of social, cultural, and political strategies designed to stabilize and protect identity from the effects of difference, a

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<sup>18</sup> For a full discussion of the concept of biopolitics see Timothy Campbell, Esposito and Vint.

difference that is in many ways analogous to the demands of community (*Communitas* 1-10). A second possible response, one that belongs to a more nuanced notion of immunity (elaborated both by Esposito and by Donna Haraway), is to attempt to find ways to value and engage with difference (Butler, *Prekarious Life* xii-xiii).

In many of the postapocalyptic texts I discuss here, the distinction between man and monster is intentionally indistinct. As the distance between these two figures collapses, so too do the representations of hegemonic masculine identity on display. This indistinction, in turn, opens onto an exploration of alternative ways of identifying with difference, ways that imagine alternative types of community. Wegner suggests, “One of the most pressing projects of our contemporary moment is that of the invention of new imaginaries of radical political agency, of figures that appear, from the perspective of the ruling order, as monsters (14). In what follows, I suggest that postapocalyptic science fiction offers a means of imagining new forms of belonging. Confronted with the inadequacy of their normative masculine identity, the protagonists of many of the works under discussion here choose to leave the boundaries of what is acceptable and cross over into the abject or the unknown—essentially, they choose to become monsters in their own right. In so doing, these characters offer alternative figurations of what an identity based on the value of difference and change might look like.

A somewhat playful illustration of this dynamic is to be found in the film *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010), which, one might argue, lightly echoes the coding of postapocalyptic narrative. This film demonstrates the potential of the monstrous figure to rearticulate dominant modes of being in the world and in community with others; indeed, it shows that (in Bakhtinian fashion) it is the monstrous body which opens onto questions of limits, emergence and possibility. Indeed, what I am calling common monsters of the wasteland are allegorical figures,

ones that appear monstrous (from the hegemonic perspective) but stage an imaginative movement through the limitations of the dominant order to arrive in a common space, a community. The children's film *How to Train Your Dragon* offers an exceptional illustration of the potential of the non-normative and monstrous body to offer figurations of new ways of being in the world. *How to Train Your Dragon* follows the exploits of Hiccup, a young Viking living in the community of Berk. This community lives under the constant threat of erasure and attack, and its people have entirely adapted their lifestyle to fending off this threat, such that Berk's customs, rituals—even its bodies—are geared to that purpose. Hiccup describes the community at the film's opening: "This is Berk. It's twelve days north of Hopeless and a few degrees south of Freezing to Death. It's located solidly on the Meridian of Misery. My village. In a word: sturdy. It's been here for seven generations, but every single building is new." The audience soon learns that Berk is under siege by swarms of very destructive dragons, so that, just as the buildings are continually rebuilt, everyone living in Berk has grown accustomed to the threat of attack, loss and death. Indeed, Hiccup's mother is an absent figure in the film, presumably having been killed by a dragon.

That the film obscures the anxiety and traumatic nature of this situation is not surprising, given its intended audience, but the film's basic coding of Berk as a community in crisis opens interesting lines of narrative. For instance, the central conflict of *How to Train Your Dragon* revolves primarily around two bodies, that of Hiccup and that of the most dangerous of all dragons—the Night Fury. Each of these (very different) bodies is initially coded as monstrous; however, by the film's ending they have become the governing symbol of a rearticulated and markedly better community.



In Berk, both men and women are warrior-like, able to engage dragons in fisticuffs at any moment. This militancy is written on their bodies: members of the community—young and old alike—wear armor on a daily basis; some even replace missing limbs (eaten by dragons) with weapons so as to better prepare their bodies for battle. Hiccup’s body, however, is a problem in this regard. He is small, clumsy and decidedly non-aggressive. He cannot wield a weapon or hold his own in a fight. Hiccup’s awkwardness is compounded by the fact that he is the only son of Berk’s leader, Stoick the Vast. Speaking about his father’s disappointment in his small body, Hiccup imagines his father’s reaction at his son’s birth: “Excuse me, barmaid! I’m afraid you brought me the wrong offspring. I ordered an extra-large boy with beefy arms, extra guts and glory on the side. This here, this is a talking fish-bone.” In other words, Hiccup recognizes his non-normative masculinity in the midst of a highly normalized community; this recognition causes him to suffer.

Early in the film, Hiccup acknowledges that his only opportunity for inclusion in the community is to kill a dragon—something that he (like the rest of the young in the film) has never done. He tells his mentor, Gobber, “I’ll kill a dragon. My life will get infinitely better. I might even get a date!” Gobber responds, “You can’t lift a hammer, you can’t swing an axe,” then gestures to all of Hiccup’s body before finishing his advice, “If you ever want to get out there to fight dragons, you need to stop all *this*.” The reason for Hiccup’s suffering, in other words, is his inadequate body.

Early in the film, Hiccup—using his unusual skill at mechanical engineering—devises a trap and snares a Night Fury. He is initially excited about what this will mean for his social status, but, when confronted with the moment of the kill, Hiccup cannot—perhaps it is better to say will not—kill the dragon. Instead, in the time-honored tradition of children’s film, he

befriends his enemy. That the narrative pursues this course is not remarkable in and of itself; indeed, there seems little other diegetic choice. What is remarkable, however, is that the relationship between Hiccup and the dragon, subsequently called Toothless, is grounded in the representation of inadequate and damaged bodies, of Hiccup and Toothless, respectively. And, these “broken” bodies provide the impetus for the emergence of a new kind of community in Berk, a community based on something other than violence.

When Hiccup learns that his trap has wounded Toothless, so that the dragon can no longer fly, Hiccup determines to help him, knowing that “a downed dragon is a dead dragon.” To this end, he designs a mechanical tail fin to replace the one severed by the trap. The only caveat to this prosthetic replacement is that, in order for Toothless to return to the sky, Hiccup must ride along on the dragon’s back to control the artificial tail. In this newly symbiotic relationship, Hiccup finds that his small, previously inadequate body gives him a measure of agility and balance and is perfectly suited to flight. This allows Hiccup and Toothless to become unlikely allies. Subsequently, their relationship opens onto possibilities and knowledge that no Viking before Hiccup has imagined. However, the film marks the materiality of Hiccup and Toothless’ alliance in more ways than the dragon’s damaged tail.

After a series of minor adventures and an obligatory plot reversal, Hiccup and Toothless unite to defend Berk (and its dragons) from the film’s villain—a massive, prehistoric dragon that threatens to destroy the community and dragons altogether. Of course, they succeed in defeating the dragon and saving the village. However, in the process, Hiccup is wounded and slips into a coma. At the film’s conclusion, Hiccup wakes in his father’s house and is alarmed to see Toothless perched in the rafters. Fearing his father’s reaction if the dragon is discovered, Hiccup jumps out of bed to rush out. At this moment, he discovers that his leg is missing below the knee

and has been replaced with a mechanical prosthesis. Unfazed—such reminders of violence are common in Berk, after all—Hiccup moves to the door, and opening it discovers a newly reimagined Berk, literally crawling with dragons that rather than attacking the village, are living there symbiotically with the Vikings. The film concludes with Hiccup and Toothless preparing for flight. Here, the camera focuses again on Hiccup’s leg: it has been designed—by Gobber, no less—to couple with Toothless’ prosthetic tail and saddle. As the two “monstrous” figures physically connect, their coupling emphasizes the fact that Hiccup has survived the loss of his normative masculinity—both he and Toothless are, after all, symbolically castrated—yet denied the possibility of being “properly masculine,” Hiccup has discovered instead a connection to a kind of community previously unimaginable.

The attention paid to the body in *How to Train Your Dragon* opens out into an examination of the social fabric of the whole community, as well as the community’s historical situation. Where the endless warring with dragons once seemed like an unavoidable aspect of life in Berk—the Vikings joke that “It’s an occupational hazard”—the introduction of monstrous bodies into the community wakes its collective imagination to new historical possibilities. In this way the film demonstrates not only the power of the monstrous figure to question dominant norms but also illustrates the ways in which that figure may come to represent possible alternatives to those norms.

*How to Train Your Dragon* demonstrates the dynamic potential of postapocalyptic fiction to meditate on the limitations and possibilities of community. Furthermore, this narrative emphasizes the need for critical attention to representations of embodiment in postapocalyptic texts, for the power of the body in this context is that it disrupts the normalized functioning of power and opens a space for the imaginative invention of alternatives, what Judith Butler calls

“rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law” (*Bodies* xii). It is important, however, to object that neither *I Am Legend* nor *How to Train Your Dragon* offer a tenable vision of collectivity that both respects and thrives on difference: in Matheson’s novel, the emergent community of vampires is wholly unavailable to Neville; in *How to Train Your Dragon*, the Vikings and dragons, for the most part, seem to get along by adhering to their similarities, to the detriment of any differences.

Recent postapocalyptic narratives offer more interesting, if inherently more complex, visions of collectivity. One such example is to be found in Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009), a film that preserves traces of both Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and Cronenberg’s *The Fly* (1986). The film follows the misadventures of Wikus Van De Merwe, a corporate middle-man charged with corralling a massive population of aliens out of one slum and into another. After being exposed to a mysterious alien technology, however, Wikus begins to transform—bodily at least—into an alien himself. In the film’s closing shot, Wikus has become an alien, but the film leaves several indications that he is, in a way, still himself—impossibly, both human and alien. In this ending, Wikus becomes a signifier for a new kind of community, one that preserves both collectivity and difference, one that opens out onto the unknown.

The relationship between the heroic protagonist and the monster is a litmus test of sorts for the community. In many of the examples of postapocalyptic science fiction discussed below, the would-be heroic protagonist fails to defend himself or his way of life against change—and, in the metaphor of the monster, he fails to defend himself against suffering, infection or transformation. However, what sets these narratives apart is not that these men fail to maintain the status quo, it is the fact that, having failed, they come to understand themselves and their relationship to others in new and often more equitable ways. This new understanding, in turn,

opens onto new possibilities for the practice of community. In the relationship between man and monster, postapocalyptic science fiction explores the complex and contradictory relationships that exist between the body and individual identity, as well as the body, identity and the wider concept of community. Nowhere, perhaps, is this exploration any more apparent than in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Dissonant Heroics and (Un)Learned Identity in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*

In what follows, I discuss the ways in which *I Am Legend* elaborates a critique against Matheson's 1950s status quo by deconstructing the twinned traditional figures of the masculine hero and the monster. Rather than presenting Richard Neville as a hero, stoically defending himself against the monsters outside his door, Matheson treats Neville as an intractable figure who cannot bring himself to adapt to the changed world in which he finds himself living.<sup>19</sup> *I Am Legend* is significant in this regard because it does much to inaugurate a strain of postapocalyptic fiction focused on the inadequacies of hegemonic masculinity for dealing with social, cultural and political change—a strain that extends into both zombie and dystopian fiction. Moreover, the novel has exerted an unusual amount of influence on postapocalyptic science fiction film, in no small part because the novel has now been adapted to film three times. For this reason, Matheson's critique of normative masculine identity and his privileging of an alternative conception of community have spread, virus-like, to widely inform the creation and reception of postapocalyptic science fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In an essay penned in 1923, Yevgeny Zamyatin writes, "It is an error to divide people into the living and the dead: there are people who are dead-alive, and people who are alive-alive. The dead-alive also write, walk, speak, act. But they make no mistakes; only machines make no mistakes, and they produce only dead things. The alive-alive are constantly in error, in search, in

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<sup>19</sup> There are many iterations of the Matheson monster. For a full discussion of the evolution of the monster in *I Am Legend*, its film adaptations and beyond, see Christie and Moreland.

questions, in torment” (110).<sup>20</sup> In the spirit of Yevgeny Zamyatin’s distinction between being *dead-alive* and *alive-alive*, Matheson’s *I Am Legend* traces the dangers of self-certainty and the deadliness of systems of knowledge and identity that leave no room for difference, error, risk or adventure. In the novel, Matheson envisions a relationship between self and other that values difference and the ability to change. In the character of Neville, Matheson imagines a man who sets himself the task of preserving and protecting an entire way of life. This task is, in the context of the novel, an impossible one, and much of the novel is dedicated to exploring the violent implications of Neville’s relentless pursuit of the status quo.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam suggests, “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2-3). Elsewhere, Halberstam argues for the importance of “learning to unlearn—learning, in other words, how to break with some disciplinary legacies, learning to reform and reshape others, and unlearning the many constraints that sometimes get in the way of our best efforts to reinvent our fields, our purpose, and our mission” (“Unlearning” 10). Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (hereafter *Legend*) offers just such an understanding of the disparate discourses of knowledge that come to invest identity with meaning and to inform the perspectives from which identity and community interface.

Situated as it is in the 1950s, *Legend* bespeaks a cultural period marked by “profound anxieties surrounding [America’s] self-definition” (Caputi 1). The novel recalls a culture struggling to rediscover meaningful life in the wake of the apocalyptic events of World War II (Halliwell 2-4; Booker 1-6). And it is within this perspective that Matheson’s deconstruction of Neville’s normative 1950s masculinity becomes also an exploration of the relationship between

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<sup>20</sup> See Randall’s introduction to Zamyatin’s *WE*, p. xi; See also Zamyatin’s essay “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters” (1923).

self and other, cast both as a relationship between man and monster, and ultimately, between male and female. In the novel, Matheson takes up the question of how it can be possible to discover life after apocalypse, when the histories we rely on for meaning have shattered and the communities that tell us, at least in part, who we are have disappeared. In the disruption that followed 11 September 2001, this is a question that proves to be just as appropriate in the present cultural and political moment as it was for Matheson's readers in the 1950s.

*Legend* follows Neville as he attempts to make sense of his world in the absence of community. Indeed, *Legend* invokes the sweeping importance—and risk—of community. Community is at once the most perilous and the most meaningful aspect of life (Esposito, *Communitas* 8), and in *Legend*, Matheson represents community as a kind of contagion set in relationship to immunity and to a biopolitical norm that figures heavily in Neville's identification of both himself and others as either normal or monstrous. As Roberto Esposito argues, "If community is our 'outside,' the outside-of-us, immunization is what brings us back within ourselves by severing all contact with the outside" (*Terms* 41). For Esposito, if community is a force that pulls the self toward difference, immunity refers to the ideological constructs that protect and maintain the known self.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship between immunity and community, however, is not without its contradictions. In *Legend* the space between the violence of contagion and the loneliness of immunity seems to leave little room for the production and protection of meaningful life, either

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<sup>21</sup> See Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Esposito's concept of immunity recalls Roland Barthes' discussion of inoculation in that both concepts refer to immunity/inoculation as a way to protect identity against generalized risk. Esposito's ultimate aim, however, is to point out the ways in which immunity is not—or does not have to be—solely directed at defense against generalized risk. Rather, it can be a mechanism for constructing meaningful connections with difference. See also Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*.



individually or collectively. For Neville, survival seems possible only at the cost of shutting out all contact with the outside and with the community that is plagued by death, a community that has in fact come to be synonymous with death. This shutting out is, however, extremely costly, destroying as it does the bonds of love, fidelity and kinship that seem to make meaningful life possible. On the other hand, as becomes clear later in the novel, survival without community is its own kind of hell, and after a fashion, it is a survival that ends in the same kind of violence as contagion. As Esposito asks, “How are we to fight the immunization of life without making it do death’s work? How are we to break down the wall of the individual while at the same time saving the singular gift that the individual carries?” (*Communitas* 19).

This dilemma is at work in *Legend* as the novel turns on the contiguous lines of relationality, identification and resistance that inhere in the notion of immunity. More than strictly biological, immunity in *Legend* becomes a biopolitical metaphor in the sense that it represents a nexus of seemingly disparate discourses that nevertheless figure intimately in protagonist Robert Neville’s identification practices, in his recognition (and misrecognition) of himself and others. The story in *Legend* is fairly straightforward; in many ways, it is a narrative that “follows a relentless descent into despair and finally death” (Clasen 322).

In the postapocalyptic world of the novel, Neville is the last of his kind, marked by an immunity to a plague that has transformed his neighbors into shambling, ghoulish vampires. The scene is familiar enough. *Legend* shares a storied connection with George Romero, whose *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978)—“Matheson’s illegitimate, but genealogically undeniable cinematic descendants” (Moreland 78)—establish the infectious zombie and besieged farmhouse as the superlative symbol of imperiled identity and desperate survival, a symbolic valence lifted almost directly from Matheson. *Legend* also influences the

writing of Stephen King, a lineage all the more remarkable given the status of *The Stand* (1978), King's own vision of a postapocalyptic world peopled with monsters (Moreman 130). As if these instances of Matheson's cultural influence were not enough, the novel itself has been adapted to film three times: first as *The Last Man on Earth* (Ragona and Salkow 1964), then as *The Omega Man* (Sagal 1971), and most recently as *I Am Legend*.<sup>22</sup> Called both "one of the most prominent vampire novels of the twentieth century" and "a turning point in written horror," *Legend* has become a vital ancestor for contemporary postapocalyptic narratives in fiction, film, television and graphic media (Patterson 19; Moreman 130). The persistence of Matheson's legacy, littered as it is with vampires, ghouls, zombies and other various infected, suggests the resilience and pervasiveness of cultural anxieties about the tenuous boundaries of immunity/identity and contagion/community.

The figurative entanglement between immunity and identity is established long before either Matheson, Romero or King takes up the theme. As Elana Gomel points out, the narrative of plague "links together such outwardly disparate texts as Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* [1722], Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* [1826], [and] Albert Camus's *The Plague* [1947]" (407). It is perhaps Shelley's *The Last Man* that most directly consolidates fragments of eschatological literature and myth into the postapocalyptic narrative that eventually informs Matheson. Inspired in part by works such as Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Granville's *Le Dernier Homme* (1805) and George Gordon Lord Byron's *Darkness* (1816), *The Last Man* is "the first truly secular apocalypse," particularly in Shelley's persistent focus on nature and on the materiality of bodies, rather than the ecstatic millenarianism of previous apocalyptic texts like the *Revelation of St. John* (Davis 283). The novel follows Lionel Verney, the Last Man, as he

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<sup>22</sup> For a useful discussion of the film adaptations of Matheson's novel, see also Moreman.

pays witness to an epidemic that claims the lives of everyone around him. Finding himself immune to the plague, Verney gradually becomes “a tenuous narrative ‘I’ wandering over the depopulated earth and slowly dissolving in its silence” (Gomel 414). Lingered in a world without the possibility of community or relationship to others, there is little else that Verney can do besides fade into the landscape—a haunting, if fittingly Romantic consummation of subjectivity and environment. If, as Gomel points out, “[this] dissolution of identity is the main theme of the novel that inaugurates the age of fantastic pandemics” (413), Matheson self-consciously inverts this theme in *Legend*, focusing instead on the recalcitrance of Neville’s identity, along with the immunitary practices and codes of recognition that support it—codes of recognition that are deeply imbricated in Neville’s notions of biological and gender norms, as well as his sense of heroic masculinity.

On first examination, *Legend* appears to be a straightforward recapitulation of standard 1950s science fiction fare: the man versus monster or “creature feature” of the type discussed in Susan Sontag’s “The Imagination of Disaster” (Moreland 80). Sontag famously (and wryly) articulates the categorical predictability with which some significant Other—monster, alien, radioactively mutated giant tomato—imperils the normal lives of regular folk, always on a massive scale. After unbelievable devastation, which provides a degree of voyeuristic pleasure in its expansiveness, the threatening Other is somehow defeated by an outmatched, beleaguered and yet courageously masculine hero (40-41). She writes, “The old science fiction films, and most of the comics, still have an essentially innocent relation to disaster. Mainly they offer new versions of the oldest romance of all—of the strong invulnerable hero with a mysterious lineage come to do battle on behalf of good against evil” (42). Despite appearances, such is not the case in *Legend*. Matheson’s story is unusual in its treatment of the figures of monster and man; as Sean

Moreland has argued, the novel gradually collapses “the traditional distinction between protagonist and monster, norm and aberration...” (80-81), opening onto a critique of traditional ways of defining self and other.

Throughout the novel, Matheson depicts Neville attempting to emulate the courageous and properly manly hero of legend: surrounded by vampires, he routinely fashions wooden stakes and garlic wreaths to hunt and kill them. However, Matheson subverts the clean lines of distinction that Neville relies on when, near the novel’s end, Neville encounters Ruth, a woman infected with the same contagion that has turned many of Neville’s friends and neighbors into vampires. Ruth tells Neville that, along with many others like her, she is only infected, not dead or dying, not the monster that Neville takes her to be. Together, Ruth tells him, she and the other infected are gradually recovering from the damage inflicted by the epidemic and discovering new ways to live in the changed world. In a moment that proves to be the affective center of the novel, Ruth helps Neville recognize that he has been killing, without distinction, both the undead and the living (Matheson 143). So much for heroics. Rather, Neville’s efforts to survive and to preserve for himself a certain way of life turn out to be not only misguided but also intimately harmful to those around him (Moreman 142). The heroic masculine identity that Neville relentlessly pursues proves to be an unreliable and untenable way of being in relationship to others.

The critique of heroic masculine identity in *Legend* is established in terms of immunity and community. Importantly, immunity for Neville becomes a cipher through which he understands both himself and others. In this way, Matheson is able to invoke the notion of immunity as a site of interaction for discourses of identification and difference that invest not only Neville’s recognition of himself as properly masculine (and heroically normal) but also his

(mis)recognition of those around him as non-human, non-normative and thereby monstrous and subject to death. As Vanessa Lemm writes, “Immunization [can be] understood as a frontier, a dividing line, a term or limit (of the political) that protects individual life from the demands of community” (4). Immunity, in a way that becomes ambivalently associated with Neville’s biological body, marks the outer limit of Neville’s sense of self, as well as the boundary of his worldview.

More than just a metaphor for the defense of Neville’s identity, however, immunity in *Legend* is a point of interaction between larger discourses of self-definition that ground the novel in the cultural anxieties of the 1950s. Neville’s relentless search for a well-bounded, clear identity echoes the anxiety and ambivalence that pervade that period in American history. As Michael Kimmel points out, “In our stereotypic image the 1950s was an era of quiet, order, and security. What we like to remember as a simple time, ‘happy days,’ was also an era of anxiety and fear, during which ideas of normality were enforced with a desperate passion... The 1950s was a decade of containment” (236). Indeed, the diegetic motifs of *Legend*, the various means by which Neville seeks to immunize himself from doubt, follow a pattern of “containment” and “desperate enforcement” in keeping with Esposito’s claim that “The immunitary system is always and everywhere. We are identified with ourselves, definitively drawn away from being altered by the community” (*Terms* 43). More than the actions of a hero, Neville’s actions are the stuff of desperation. In this way, what begins for Neville as immunity—as the protection of life—becomes increasingly impersonal violence, a movement that Deborah Christie calls a “reversal from identification to negation” (74).

In “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse,” Donna Haraway writes, “The perfection of the fully defended, ‘victorious’ self is a

chilling fantasy...[it] is a chilling fantasy, whether located in the abstract spaces of national discourse, or in the equally abstract spaces of our interior bodies” (*Simians* 224). Neville’s investment in immunity appears in *Legend* as a pursuit of just such a “victorious” self, whether this perfected self is articulated as properly masculine or as “fully human” in the Cartesian sense. Neville mistakenly recognizes himself—especially his body—as a kind of zero theorem: to his mind, he is the measure of what is normal and proper. Neville appeals to his body as a way to categorize those around him as inhuman, unreal or simply undead. More to the point, under the pretense of this knowledge of bodies, Neville’s identification of himself and others becomes increasingly biopolitical, collating disparate biological, juridical and political knowledges into a mythic delineation of self and other. As Kathy Davis Patterson writes, “Under the lens of Neville’s microscope, his own blood becomes the standard for identifying what is pure—and, by default, what is human: the middle class white heterosexual male” (21).

Such investment in representations of the body is not surprising, given the cultural associations that exist between the male body and masculinity. Most intimately, it is Neville’s body that is under siege by the plague and the undead monsters it produces. However, it is also Neville’s body that becomes his first line of defense—the primary site upon which he organizes a negotiation of norm and aberration, man and monster. As Christopher E. Forth argues, “Saddled with the expectation of being capable of enduring discomfort, whether due to manual labor, physical ailments, inclement weather, enemy armies or just irritating people, the male body is conceptualized as an ideally bounded entity, equipped with psychological and physical resources that maintain a sharp distinction between self and other” (8-9). Indeed, Neville repeatedly invokes his body’s manly ability to adapt to hardship, to endure punishment and still remain essentially uncompromised.

In the opening act of the novel, for instance, Neville moves through his suburban house-turned-fortress, encountering along the way the stark differences between his past and present home. In one scene, Neville faces the strange fact that his house is dirty, and there is no one but himself to clean it. Matheson writes, “[Neville] knew he should burn up the paper plates and utensils too, and dust the furniture and wash out the sinks and the bathtub and toilet, and change the sheets and pillowcases on his bed; but he didn’t feel like it. For he was a man and he was alone and these things had no importance to him” (3). Matheson goes on to show Neville preparing garlic with which to fend off nightly vampire attacks. When the smell of garlic becomes too strong, he forces himself to endure it because he knows, “A man could get used to anything if he had to” (Matheson 4). Matheson’s comic juxtaposition of Neville the postapocalyptic survivor-turned-vampire-hunter with Neville the man obligated to do the dishes and scrub the floors foregrounds the ambiguity that underwrites representations of normative masculine identity in *Legend*.

Matheson continually complicates Neville’s performance of such gender norms. He portrays Neville as traditionally manly, yet this portrayal repeatedly takes on coded meanings. The first description of Neville in *Legend* is simple, yet it invokes a stereotypically masculine image: “[Neville] walked around the house in the dull gray of afternoon, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, trailing threadlike smoke over his shoulder” (1). In an image that recalls Bogart in the noirs, Matheson places Neville strategically outside the house, an ostensibly feminized space. Quixotically rugged and urbane, Neville appears in a situation that sees him simultaneously laboring and consuming, both physically engaged and in repose. Neville seems to simultaneously coincide with any number of masculine ideals. However, in ways that become increasingly clear later in the novel, Neville’s mere presence outside his house is a venture into a

space that is paradoxically coded as both civilized and savagely dangerous. In one of many inversions that pervade *Legend*, Matheson subverts the connotations of the well-kept yard, reading it instead as exposure and risk. Thus, what begins as a description of Neville's masculine body at work and play transmutes into an image of that body in peril.

Matheson codes the house as a refuge of safety. Neville, just by venturing beyond his front door into the symbolic space of his yard, daily repeats in his own diminished way the mythic American journey westward, as if he were a postapocalyptic cowboy in the ruins of Los Angeles. Sontag sees an intrinsic similarity between the generic western and science fiction: "The typical science fiction film has a form as predictable as a western and is made up of elements which, to a practiced eye, are as classic as the saloon brawl, the blonde schoolteacher from the East, and the gun duel on the deserted main street" (*Disaster* 40). Indeed, Neville shares many thematic similarities to the figure of the cowboy, albeit he rides in a station wagon and wields a wooden stake in lieu of saddling trusty horse and holstering six-shooter. Moreover, Neville's daily journeys outward from his house have the singular purpose of taming the unrecognizably savage world in which he finds himself. Carl Abbott writes, "The undertext of the American western is the advance of civilization through contests with nature, native peoples, and nasty outlaws. This theme of continental expansion encompasses the dominant national myth of the United States, and it serves as the American equivalent of European imperialism and imperial adventuring" (14). Daily leaving his house to hunt and kill vampires, the burden of civilization falls to Neville; he behaves as if it his task to be the bearer of a normalized body and a heroic, masculine identity destined restore the proper boundaries of life and death. Although the landscapes have changed, Neville still appears locked in a mortal (moral) battle with nature, natives and nasties.



Matheson's metaphorical reiteration of Neville as a cowboy figure continues the ambiguity that plagues Neville's identification of himself as both manly and heroic. Kimmel writes, "Nowhere is the dynamic of American masculinity more manifest than in our singular contribution to the world's storehouse of cultural heroes: the cowboy. It was the United States that gave the world the cowboy legend, and Americans continue to see him as the embodiment of the American spirit." Kimmel goes on to write that in his mythic embodiment, "[T]he cowboy is fierce and brave, willing to venture into unknown territory and tame it for its less-than-masculine inhabitants...The cowboy is a man of impeccable ethics, whose faith in natural law and natural right is eclipsed only by the astonishing fury with which he demands adherence to them" (*History* 94). Certainly, Neville mimics the journey of the cowboy in his endeavors to reclaim the land around him from those he believes have wrongfully infested it. More disturbing, however, is that Neville relentlessly adheres to what he believes to be "natural law and natural right." Once Neville believes that he is the arbiter of such rights and laws, he is able to rationalize the violence he commits in service to them.

Neville's conception of law and right is grounded first of all in his understanding of immunity, a misguided knowledge that is reinforced by the discourse of scientific rationality to which Neville repeatedly appeals. As Moreman puts it, in *Legend*, Matheson critiques "traditional authority structures, including institutionalized religion and scientific rationalization" and displays misgivings about overall processes of rationalization that pervade the 1950s (130-133). Thus, as often happens, a particular kind of knowledge takes on mythical importance in Neville's recognition of the world around him. For instance, when Neville nears making a scientific discovery about the plague, he becomes giddy with excitement: "All right, little boy, he tried kidding himself, calm down now. Santa Claus is coming to town with all the nice answers"

(Matheson 72). Matheson's turn of phrase here is particularly apt—Neville's conception of scientific inquiry is reductive at best, but more properly it is intensely exclusionary, bounded on every side by Neville's assumptions about both his body and the bodies of others. Neville's understanding of his privileged, immune life is more an example of magical thinking than it is scientific reasoning.

In this way, immunity and identity for Neville are contradictorily entangled in an unwieldy conglomeration of cultural myth and naturalized coding practices—Neville's recognition of himself and others is flawed from the start. Donna Haraway writes: "Biology is about recognition and misrecognition, coding errors, the body's reading practices...[the] biomedical-biotechnical body is a semiotic system, a complex meaning-producing field, for which the discourse of immunology, that is, the central biomedical discourse on recognition/misrecognition, has become a high-stakes practice in many senses" (*Simians* 211). Neville's recognition of himself, likewise, as properly masculine and subsequently properly human infects his negotiation of those lines of identification that Haraway, recalling Bruno Latour, elaborates as "The Great Divides between what counts as nature and as society, as nonhuman and as human" (*Species* 9).<sup>23</sup> Haraway writes:

Whelped in the Great Divides, the principal Others to man, including his 'posts,' are well documented in ontological breed registries in both past and present Western cultures: gods, machines, animals, monsters, creepy crawlies, women, servants and slaves, and noncitizens in general. Outside the security checkpoint of bright reason, outside the apparatuses of reproduction of the sacred image of the same, these 'others' have a remarkable capacity to induce panic in the centers of power and self-certainty (*Species* 9-10).

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<sup>23</sup> Haraway references Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Arts and Media; and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

In this regard, Neville is desperate to establish clear identities and sharp lines of relationality between himself and others. This is particularly the case, given that such lines of identification potentially grant Neville power over others. From this vantage point of desperation, Neville enacts lethally narrow definitions of himself and others, so that his accepted ideas of life, personhood and belonging become violently flattened and abstracted (Christie 76). Like the mythic hero Sontag describes in “The Imagination of Disaster” or the mythic cowboy, arbiter of all that is natural and right, that Kimmel outlines, Neville in *Legend* appeals to (immunitary) figures of science, rationality, “bright reason,” and “the sacred image of the same” as a way of quelling the panic he feels in the face of apocalyptic change. What he fails to realize is that, from the beginning, he has misrecognized his situation and has failed to acknowledge that it is impossible to “solve a problem using the same methods that created it in the first place” (Halberstam 10).

When Neville’s coding of self and other fails to hold, the consequences are dire: Neville defensive strategies explode into violence—a violence ironically aimed both at his own body and the bodies of others. Esposito explains this transition: “Certainly, we need immune systems. No individual or social body could do without them, but when they grow out of proportion they end up forcing the entire organism to explode or implode” (62). Lemm parses the notion in this way: “The idea of immunity, necessary for the protection of individual life, if carried past a certain threshold or limit, ends up attacking itself” (6). In essence, Neville’s immunity both saves and betrays him, in no small part because he conceives of himself in the absence of community.

The relationship between immunity and community in *Legend* revolves around the ways in which Neville—and later Ruth—reacts to the presence of alterity within the boundaries of identity. Mathias Clasen writes, “Matheson affirms the value of sociality, and at the same time

voices his ambivalence toward other people (as potential companions *and* potential threats) and also his own culture of conformity, in which the individualist—so often the protagonist of Matheson’s fiction—can never truly fit in” (325-26, emphasis original). If, as Clasen points out, Matheson’s protagonists—not only in *Legend* but also in works like *The Shrinking Man* (1956)—find it impossible to conform to ideal norms, this is especially the case with Neville, but with a key difference. Beneath Neville’s frantic attempts to recover self-certainty and establish a system of identification that preserves his identity intact, there is an ever-present current of abjection, in the sense that Julia Kristeva intends the term—as that which disturbs identity. Not only can Neville not fit in with those around him, but he cannot even fit in with himself. He is plagued by doubt. Early in the novel, as he begins to contemplate the elaborate defenses he daily sets up around his house, he asks himself, “Defense?...For what?” (Matheson 4). Later, in an attempt to forget the family he has lost in the plague, Neville renames the rooms of his house that used to belong to his wife and daughter. When he slips and refers to these spaces by their old names, old relations, he repeatedly reprimands himself. Matheson writes, “What will I do if I ever run out of coffin nails? [Neville] wondered, looking at the cigarette’s blue trailing smoke. Well, there wasn’t much chance of that. He had about a thousand cartons in the closet of Kathy’s—He clenched his teeth together. In the closet of the *larder*, the *larder*, the *larder*. Kathy’s room” (19). Neville tries—and fails—to reinvent the house as a solely masculine space, one that would allow him to deny his loneliness and need for others.

The correlation between memory, language and the body in these passages speaks to the persistence of community in a world ruled by Neville’s desire for absolute immunity. However he may try, Neville cannot unambiguously assume the role of “victorious self” that he is so desperate to hide behind. Persistent traces of community appear in *Legend*, nearly always against

Neville's will and wish. Perhaps the most prominent example of such affective, embodied memory is Neville's sexuality.<sup>24</sup>

*Legend* is replete with examples of Neville's sexual tension. Even as he hides out from what he knows to be certain death at the hands of the vampires, Neville's most intimate struggle is with sexual desires that he deems unmanly and unnatural. Matheson writes, "All the knowledge in those books couldn't put out the fires in him; all the words of centuries couldn't end the wordless, mindless craving of his flesh. The realization made him sick. It was an insult to a man. All right, it was a natural drive, but there was no outlet for it any more. They'd forced celibacy on him; he'd have to live with it. You have a mind, don't you? he asked himself. Well, use it!" (8). The collision of flesh, mind, knowledge and nature in this passage foregrounds the pressures and fissions that plague Neville's embodiment. In these moments when the abject returns to trouble the norm, when the tongue slips or the body remembers things that do not match Neville's self-certain worldview, his response is to violently suppress his body. In its own way, such violence is a necessary component of such desperate normativity, an immunity that seeks to destroy everything that troubles its narrowly defined parameters for what is self and what is threat.

The constant patterns of masochistic violence that Neville directs at himself and his body pale in comparison to the violence he employs against those he considers to be his "others," yet, it is remarkable violence nonetheless. Neville's relationship to his body is troubled throughout *Legend*—his is body that resists the reductive norms that Neville seeks to force on it.<sup>25</sup> This recalcitrance is most visible in Neville's negotiations of sexual desire, but it is also present in

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<sup>24</sup> See Patterson, "Echoes of *Dracula*: Racial Politics and the Failure of Segregated Spaces in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*," for a full discussion of sexuality in *I Am Legend*.

<sup>25</sup> For a valuable discussion of the troubled relationships that exist between ideology and bodies, see Watson, *Reading for the Body* (University of Georgia Press, 2012).

Neville's ambiguous attempts to be heroic. For instance, faced with the violence of killing the vampires (and the infected humans), Neville carries on with his mission out of a misguided sense of responsibility—when he questions the rightness of his actions, he asks himself simply, “What else can I do?” (Matheson 15). His body, however, betrays his commitment to violent heroism. Matheson writes, “[Neville] stood in the bedroom doorway, staring at the small bed by the window, his throat moving, breath shuddering in his chest. Then, driven on, he walked to the side of the bed and looked down at her. Why do they all look like Kathy to me? he thought, drawing out a the second stake with shaking hands” (15). In this disturbingly violent passage—which depicts Neville killing an infected child—Matheson's descriptions of Neville's body reveal a deep sense of uneasiness and doubt. As his hands shake, his breath shudders and his throat tightens, the thing that drives Neville on to act is not an embodied belief or a fleshly drive toward survival. It is, rather, merely an idea, an ideology of life and personhood based in the abstract and not in the vitality of lived experience itself. Neville trusts abstract knowledge over his own eyes, his own gut, and whenever his body raises doubts about what he is doing, he treats it with violence, as if to beat it into submission. Neville's constant drinking becomes a kind of violence toward his consciousness, a way to keep his body numb to what implores it, and his frustrations frequently result in frenzied bouts of punching up his living room, inevitably injuring his hands, ambivalent symbols of violence that they are.

In much the same way, violence comes to be Neville's chosen way of dealing with others. The vampires that surround Neville's house at night, and the infected humans that he stalks during the day, are unknown to him, monstrous in their unaccountability. Matheson writes: “Usually he [Neville] felt a twinge when he realized that, but for some affliction he didn't understand, these people were the same as he” (28). Neville's appeals to science, to his immune

body and blood as a control factor, can be recognized as an attempt to identify and ensconce the infected as his Other. As Kimmel puts it, “If the suburban breadwinner father didn’t exactly know who he was, he could at least figure out who he wasn’t” (*Manhood* 236). Indeed, one way for Neville to deal with his own self-doubt is to enforce a proscriptive identity on others, something he does violently and repeatedly. Yet this identity is ultimately neither practical nor political; rather, the instant of identification for Neville is biological, inherently dependent upon “some affliction he didn’t understand.” Thus, despite repeated attempts to reassure himself of his own superiority, Neville’s doubt continually returns, like an abject reminder that he is not as healthy or normal as he would believe. Likewise, the codes that he repeatedly enforces on “others” prove to be inadequate and to require relentless reaffirmation. Thus, Neville’s misnaming of others locks him into a cycle of misrecognition and violence.

The kinships between misrecognition and violence in *Legend* are found in Neville’s desire to effect an erasure of identity for the people he kills. As he says himself, “it was better not to know anything about the people you killed” (Matheson 115). In other words, Neville very much wants to forget that the vampires and infected humans he is struggling with are known to him. This is particularly the case with Cortman, Neville’s erstwhile neighbor. Cortman is recognizable to Neville, even calls Neville by name, yet, Neville insists that Cortman is no longer himself but *other* than himself. As such, Cortman’s presence inspires in Neville an especially intense desire to blot out Cortman’s identity. Neville fantasizes: “Someday I’ll get that bastard, he thought as he took a big swallow of the bitter drink. Someday I’ll knock a stake right through his goddamn chest. I’ll make one a foot long for him, a special one with ribbons on it, the bastard” (Matheson 8). The homosocial friction (and desire) in this passage is hard to miss. If the development and perfection of the masculine self is predominantly a homosocial rite

(Kimmel, *Manhood* 7), Neville's anxieties about his own identity become narcissistically reflected upon Cortman—particularly given that Neville fixates on destroying Cortman in an overtly sexual way, with a carefully prepared, unusually long and beautifully decorated piece of wood.

Neville's desire to erase the identity of those who are not like him is at the root of violence in *Legend*. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler outlines the problematic nature of such erasure:

Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization...If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never 'were,' and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. (33-34).

The indeterminable nature of the others is what plagues Neville. However, after he has begun to answer their "interminably spectral" nature with violence, there is only ever room for more violence, more death and more senseless oscillation between identification and negation. Neville himself becomes spectral, caught in a spiral of ambivalence, misrecognition and violence that gradually destroys him.

This deadly cycle breaks, finally, when Neville encounters Ruth. Neville sees Ruth walking through a field one afternoon, and, shocked as he is to see another person in broad daylight, Neville chases Ruth, catches her and takes her back to his house (Matheson 109-14). Neville's encounter with Ruth first of all demonstrates exactly how alienated from himself and others he has become in his obsession with immunity. Second, Ruth's presence in his home becomes a demonstration of a different possibility for the protection of identity. Finally, this interaction with Ruth offers a view of immunity and community that does not preclude life itself.



Once he meets Ruth, Neville's anxiety about identification intensifies—to him, she is an unknown variable in what had otherwise become a fairly stable semiotic system of identity and negation. Matheson writes:

All these years, he thought, dreaming about a companion. Now I meet one and the first thing I do is distrust her, treat her crudely and impatiently. And yet there was really nothing else he could do. He had accepted too long the proposition that he was the only normal person left. It didn't matter that she looked normal. He'd seen too many of them lying in their coma that looked as healthy as she. They weren't, though, and he knew it...His concept of the society had become ironbound (115).

Neville's long pursuit of self-certainty and of an end to doubt robs him of his ability to truly recognize Ruth, to find a common language with her. Moreover, Neville's "ironbound" perspective limits his ability to interact with or account for difference: "He stood over the bed, staring down at her. Ruth. There was so much about her he wanted to know. And yet he was almost afraid to find out. Because if she were like the others, there was only one course open." (Matheson 115). Neville cannot see past what he knows and imagine what is left to know. As he contemplates Ruth, he thinks, "Shall I kill her now? Shall I not even investigate, but kill her and burn her? His throat moved. Such thoughts were a hideous testimony to the world he had accepted; a world in which murder was easier than hope" (128).

Yet, by her very presence in his home, Ruth destabilizes the rigid lines of immunity that define Neville (Patterson 24; Moreman 138). In a way, Neville's encounter with Ruth is an encounter with a (feminine) difference that Neville has violently shut out, but this meeting is voiced not as a connection with unity or a touching of simultaneous identity. Rather, Neville's contact with Ruth reflects an encounter with community as Esposito defines it: "The community isn't a mode of being, much less a 'making' of the individual subject. It isn't the subject's expansion or multiplication but its exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject" (*Communitas* 7). In Ruth's

presence, Neville cannot maintain the imagined clear lines of subjectivity that he has worked so hard to establish and believe. Instead, Neville finds himself unsuspectingly drawn away from himself, toward Ruth's otherness and difference. As before, it is his body that first gives him away. Matheson describes the moment that Neville first hears Ruth's name: "A shudder ran through Robert Neville's body. The sound of her voice seemed to loosen everything in him. Questions disappeared. He felt his heart beating heavily. He almost felt as if he were going to cry. His hand moved out, almost unconsciously. Her shoulder trembled under his palm. 'Ruth,' he said in a flat, lifeless voice. His throat moved as he stared at her" (113-14). Neville experiences Ruth's presence with a bodily intensity that defies his well-bounded identity: "Simplicity had departed; the dream had faded into disturbing complexity" (Matheson 114).

After his violent efforts to negate the identity of those he kills, Ruth's voice, name and face force Neville to confront her reality. More than this, she confronts him with the truth of his misguided efforts to understand and control his own body and the world around him. Butler writes, "Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine" (*Precarious Life* 26). This is the proof that Ruth offers Neville, a proof that he is not exceptional, does not belong in the world any more, or any less than his "others." Up until this moment in the narrative, Neville has believed in his privileged place in the world, what Haraway calls "the culturally normal fantasy of human exceptionalism." She writes, "This is the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies. Thus, to be human is to be on the opposite side of the Great Divide from all the others and so to be afraid

of—and in bloody love with—what goes bump in the night” (*Species* 11). In the moment he encounters Ruth, however, Neville can no longer sustain the fantasy.

Ruth demonstrates a second possibility for immunity, one that knows how to abide with difference. Her presence recalls for Neville the feminine aspect gone from his life. Whereas Neville understands his immune body as the site of the preservation and reproduction of the same, Ruth’s body comes to represent an affirmative immunity that serves as an interface with difference—much as if she were pregnant. Understood in this way, immunity—that is, the protection of identity—becomes, as Esposito writes, “the custodian and the producer of life. It must make itself not a barrier of separation but a filter of relations with what knocks plaintively from the outside” (*Terms* 133). Esposito’s is, as well, the declination of immunity that Haraway favors when she suggests that new codes can be found for interfacing with any difference. She writes, “No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language” (*Simians* 212). Neville, however, is driven by strange confidence in his own knowledge: “‘I know,’” he said [to Ruth]. ‘I know the germ, know how it multiplies. No matter how long their [the infected human’s] systems fight it, in the end the germ will win...It’s a trap. If I didn’t kill them, sooner or later they’d die and come after me. I have no choice; no choice at all” (Matheson 135). The proscriptive language that Neville uses offers a glimpse into his confidence in himself as an arbiter of that knowledge. Only later, when Ruth tells him the story of her survival (and her husband’s death at Neville’s hands) does Neville begin to understand the limits of his knowledge, and the overlooked value of the doubt he has continually felt (Matheson 135, 143). Ruth is Neville’s perfect foil: where he has survived by closing the boundaries of self, she has survived in the opposite, by opening her body and learning to engaged

with difference, with questions and doubts. In this way, she is *alive-alive* in a way that Neville can only remember being, as if in a past life.

Neville's encounter with Ruth completes Matheson's overarching critique of dominant, heroic (masculine) identity. In a way, Neville's meeting Ruth takes on the significance of an encounter with the truth that can only come through facing difference and otherness. Neville, facing the truth of Ruth's identity, the truth of her otherness, must also come face to face with the fact that he has not really ever been alone but has been in relationship to others the whole time, no matter how he has fought the common risk of community, the common fate. As Butler argues, "If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the "we" is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation" (*Precarious Life* 22-23). Thus, it is Neville's denial of such a fundamental aspect of his identity—the fact that it is not only his, not formed apart from community—that is the focal point for Matheson's sprawling critique of traditional ways of being in the world.

The end of Matheson's novel reveals Neville as a man who finally fails to hold the lines of identity he so desperately fights to maintain. In this failure, however, he manages to learn something, to move beyond misrecognition and self-certainty. At the novel's conclusion, Neville has been captured and wounded. As he waits to die, he looks out over a crowd of infected humans and contemplates the new knowledge he sees in their faces. Matheson writes:

They all stood looking up at him with their white faces. He stared back. And suddenly he thought, I'm the abnormal one now. Normalcy was a majority concept, the standard of many and not the standard of just one man. Abruptly that realization joined with what he saw on their faces—awe, fear, shrinking horror—and he knew that they were afraid of him. To them he was some terrible scourge they had never seen, a scourge even worse than the disease they had come to live with...And he understood what they felt and did not hate them (159).

In failure, Neville experiences an epiphany that releases him from the bounds of his old identity. He feels, as if for the first time, the presence of community outside the walls he has so carefully constructed. When Neville understands what the *others* feel, he understands finally that life is not about the absence of risk or change; rather, it is quite the opposite, a process of growth, of the evolution and enrichment of self through the experience of difference. In regard to the question of how it might be possible to preserve a meaningful life after apocalypse, Matheson's answer seems to be that the self must open to others. Though this process is not without great risk—indeed, the world Ruth finds herself in is troublingly dystopian on the level of the population, even as she seems to preserve individual compassion and openness. It may be, however, the only way to allow life to flourish in the wasteland.

If Matheson ultimately critiques traditional boundaries of self and other in this way, his critique is conspicuously absent from the filmic adaptations of his novel. Rather than preserving Matheson's revisionary attitude toward heroic masculine identity, each of the films, for various reasons, elides Matheson's vision in favor of attitudes toward difference that closely echo prevailing narratives of national identity. And while it is important to take note of the significant generic (and affective) differences between Matheson's novel and the films that grow out of it, each text represents a retelling of the same story in a new context and at a specific historical moment. Comparing the narrative variations in the texts, then, offers a way to track over time the continuities and differences that come to be involved in the cultural representation of identity/immunity and community/contagion. Such representations seem particularly important at present, given the anxieties surrounding identity and community in the post-9/11 world.

M. Keith Booker points out that science fiction novels of the 1950s, like Matheson's *Legend*, tend to be more openly critical of the status quo than do the films produced during the

same period, even when those films were adaptations of previously published novels (4). In part, this dissonance is due to the fact that filmmakers are generally subject to a heightened degree of production oversight, given that the production of a film is an economic investment of an entirely different order than the writing of a novel. Even in light of such disparity, the ending of any narrative is vitally significant to the overall vision of that story. As such, the ending of a story, both in novels and films, represents a significant site of closure, one that can consistently figure prominently in the interpretation of the text. This is especially the case in allegorical texts like *Legend*. In the article, “Mending Endings: Power and Closure in Film Plots,” Gerda Dullaart points out, “The end of a film has the narrative function of linking scenes together to conclude the cause and effect of the story. It should be the crown of the structure; the logical conclusion of events; the final effect of the initial cause which sparked off the story” (246). Thus, the endings of the film adaptations of *Legend* gain a significant importance in reading the thematic variances of the texts against Matheson’s original. As Dullaart points out, following David Bordwell’s conception of “bad happy endings,” “Film adaptations of *I Am Legend* have become more and more arbitrary, more ideologically motivated from outside the text, more conventional” (265).

*The Last Man on Earth* (1964) is the first cinematic adaptation of Matheson’s *I Am Legend*. Starring Vincent Price in Neville’s role—rechristened as Robert Morgan—the story closely follows the novel. Matheson himself wrote the screenplay, but when the ending was changed at the insistence of the producers of the film, he withdrew his name from the credits (Moreman 142). Vincent Price plays Neville/Morgan with a good deal of vulnerability, especially during the sequence in which he tries to befriend a stray dog, only to have it die soon after finally capturing it. The rest of the film, however, gradually undermines the currents of ambiguity that run throughout Matheson’s novel. Instead, Morgan is increasingly confident in his

ability to cure the infected and restore the status quo. Indeed, rather than dying with the radical recognition that the world has moved on without him, Morgan dies in a church, surrounded by religious icons, including a cross, of course. The scene captures both the sacrificial logic of the crucifixion and the seemingly eternal quality of Morgan's heroic identity. Moreman parses the ending's deviation from *Legend*:

Matheson's novel casts its protagonist as an every-man who struggles to learn scientific methods in an effort to understand what is happening in the world and who recognizes the inefficacy of religion for any source of true salvation. In the end, the reader becomes aware that not only are his efforts in vain, but they are entirely misguided. *The Last Man on Earth*, however, tells the story of an elite scientist who successfully discovers a cure for what has plagued him, though his discovery is rejected by his ignorant enemy. He embraces religious symbols as a source of salvation, which are again trampled by the monsters (142).

Thus, *The Last Man on Earth* handily collapses the complexities of identity that Matheson carefully interrogates, and in their place reestablishes clear lines of separation between man and monster, self and other. Moreover, the film removes ambiguity in place of self-certainty, a kind of identity that is immune to—indeed, does not require—difference.

Vincent Price is able, in some degree at least, to bring an underworldly presence to the screen in *The Last Man on Earth*, so that the surety with which the story ends ultimately feels misbegotten, naggingly ambiguous even as the narrative refuses to recognize this ambiguity. Price's performance draws on his long association with horror film and with playing characters who were themselves excluded in some way. As such, his presence on the screen is refreshingly vulnerable. However, the same cannot be said of Charlton Heston in *The Omega Man* (1971), by far the least faithful of the adaptations of Matheson's novel. Heston plays Neville with ridiculous swagger, borrowing from his iconic status in films like *Ben-Hur* (1959), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and, of course, *Planet of the Apes* (1968). As Janani Subramanian points out, "Heston brings an almost otherworldly whiteness to

the film” (47). Indeed, Heston’s embodiment of Neville lacks almost any trace of the ambivalence and doubt that plague the character in Matheson’s novel.

Among other things, *The Omega Man* responds to prevailing anxieties surrounding (so-called) imperiled white masculinity in America at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. In many ways, the discourses of difference at play in the film echo the thematic investment of *Planet of the Apes*. As Eric Greene has argued, *Planet of the Apes* and its sequels belong in context with a vast array of social upheavals: “For the United States, the sixties and early seventies were marked by a number of wars—the cold war, the Vietnam War, civil rights battles, ‘the war on poverty’—that were tumultuous public contestations of the character and meaning of United States society” (8). The effects of this turmoil can be glimpsed, Green goes on to say, in the “stinging sense of despair that pervades the *Apes* series” (8). *The Omega Man* responds to such despair by reinforcing the belief that the heroic masculinity portrayed by Heston was part of an American heritage that was both a natural right and a natural law and could, if one were so lucky, be embodied in a man like Heston/Neville. As Forth points out in another context, “a crisis of national identity that demanded a ‘remasculinization of America’ [is] evident in mass culture and political discourses in the 1970s” (203). The appeal, then, of Heston’s portrayal of Neville falls squarely within the bounds of his ability to emote an ideally bounded sense of manhood. Heston’s turn as Neville recalls the traditionally unambiguous leader/savior figures of that Heston had played in earlier biblical films. Absent entirely is Matheson’s critique of self-certainty, his valuing of doubt and openness toward difference: “In *The Omega Man* there is no social evolution; instead the status quo is maintained by the military, scientific, and religious authorities” (Moreman 143).



Christopher Morman argues that Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend* (2007) is more a direct remake of *The Omega Man* than a retelling of Matheson's novel (143). However, despite the film's recapitulation of several iconic images taken from the Heston film—most of them predictably images of muscle cars and machine guns—Lawrence's film brings Matheson's *Legend* into a context that is significantly different than *The Omega Man*'s Los Angeles setting—it is set instead in a post-9/11 New York City. The film's engagement with 9/11 is hard to miss; it opens with a protracted sequence featuring Robert Neville (Will Smith) stalking deer through the abandoned and conspicuously verdant city. A good deal of estrangement accompanies watching a postapocalyptic science fiction film that has been superimposed on a landscape that is, in a way, genuinely postapocalyptic. Indeed, the scenes of devastation and emptiness that feature in *I Am Legend* recall an experience that was, for many, more unreal than watching the film itself.<sup>26</sup> However, in the end, the film seems to do little to make this estrangement meaningful: "While *I Am Legend* hints at the feelings of fear, pain and sadness that abounded in New York after 9/11, it replaces any potential for reflection on the causes of 9/11 with the satisfaction of seeing an action-hero defeat zombies and sacrifice himself for world order. Any understanding of New York's ideological significance is subsumed..." (Subramanian 51).

The theatrical ending of *I Am Legend* closely follows the plot structure of *The Omega Man*. After having worked throughout the film to find a cure for the plague that has leveled the city, Neville finds himself and his house/research lab overrun by the feral plague victims—in this iteration of the story, they are odd vampire/zombie hybrids. Trapped in a shelter in the basement of his home, with seemingly no way of escape, Neville rushes bravely (or unimaginatively) into

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<sup>26</sup> See Jameson, "The Dialectics of Disaster."

the crowd of monsters and blows himself up, killing all of the monsters yet miraculously managing to save the two uninfected humans with him—a woman, Anna (Alice Braga) and a young boy, Ethan (Charlie Tahan). Together, they rise from the ashes of Neville’s house (and his body)—symbolically born again through his sacrifice—to escape to a human outpost outside the city. As they arrive in safety, carrying a cure for the plague derived from Neville’s blood—they are greeted by armed guards, an American flag and, in the center of it all, a church (Brayton 74). As Sean Brayton puts it, the human colony “reflects a revival of Christianity and American patriotism housed in a fortified rural community” (74). Read against the conclusion of Matheson’s novel, the theatrical ending of *I Am Legend* provides an entirely different approach to otherness, difference and community.

This tidy ending does not resonate with the rest of the film, however. It is particularly out of sync with Will Smith’s portrayal of Neville. Indeed, in the film, Smith/Neville is an intensely alienated figure, subjected to loneliness and bouts of dementia (Subramanian 48). When he first encounters Anna and Ethan, for instance, he can initially only speak to them indirectly. He first addresses Ethan by dramatically quoting a lengthy portion of dialogue taken from *Shrek* (2001). David Pike argues, “Not only does [*I Am Legend*] liberalize the gender and racial politics of the earlier cycle of films, but it surreptitiously undercuts the iconic persona of its male lead (an undercutting rendered all the more effective by the deadpan of Smith’s excellent performance), especially his star-making turn in *Independence Day* (1996)” (np). In a way that recalls both Matheson’s characterization of Neville and Vincent Price’s performance in *The Last Man on Earth*, Smith/Neville is a character with a less-than-unambiguous relationship to knowledge and power. Although he repeatedly captures and experiments on the plague victims still living in New York—killing many in the process—Neville continues to doubt, to question and to suffer.

The film *I Am Legend* also offers an alternate ending that comes closer to valuing failure and doubt in the way that Matheson's novel does. In this ending, Neville, Anna and Ethan are again trapped in the basement of Neville's house. However, rather than ending in heroic and sacrificial violence, the ending diverges in an unexpected direction. In the final scenes, Neville is separated only by a wall of glass from the dark seeker Alpha male who has harried him throughout the film. In the panic and frenetic action of the final act, the dark seeker reaches toward Neville and scrawls something in the grime that covers the glass: a butterfly that matches a tattoo on the ankle of a female plague victim Neville has earlier captured and is using to test vaccines to the plague. In this small symbol (still far less than Ruth's eloquent explanation), Neville understands that the dark seeker is there to rescue the woman. Neville opens the cage he is inside, and releases the woman. After this odd exchange, the film resolves to a final shot of Neville, Anna and Ethan driving away from the city toward the horizon. This last shot is rich with meaning, as it has been in a thousand different iterations in a thousand different films. It is the mythic American journey westward, recast as a journey into the unknown. In the context of *I Am Legend*, this ending gains meaning from the fact that Neville is leaving the city behind him, a place he at one point calls his "ground zero." Without being removed from risk or from the challenge of abiding with difference, Neville is simultaneously relinquishing control and ownership of the city and stepping out beyond the immunitary boundaries of what he knows and understands. Here is a man content to acknowledge his failure and to find in it an unexpected sort of freedom. There is no recapitulation of the status quo, only a the final figures of the survivors emerging into a world that is entirely new to them and with which they will have to learn to identify.

Matheson's vision has remained hugely influential throughout the years, even as the allegory he crafted in *Legend* has been made to carry messages that do not coincide with his misgivings about the myth of heroic masculine identity. However, even as the adaptations of Matheson's novel have repeatedly suppressed his vision, other works have continued to take up the relationship between immunity and community and to call attention to the dangers of identities that grow too strong, that fight too hard against risk and difference. Many critics have outlined the relationship between *Legend* and Romero's *Dead* films—the ambiguous alternate ending of Lawrence's *I Am Legend* indeed recalls the ending of *Dawn of the Dead*. Moreover, the critique of heroic identity that Matheson so well articulates lives on, undying or *alive-alive* in the many postapocalyptic works that continue to explore the relationship between self and other, that continue to try and present figurations of how to open the self up to community and difference—to risk touching the other in the hope that the encounter will offer a new perspective on how to be in the world.

Instead of a history of representations of embodiment and masculinity that glorify the resilient self-certainty of Heston and his ilk, the legacy of Matheson is to be found in the losers, the failures and the monsters of the wasteland. To see this subterranean legacy, one only need look closely at the lessons written on the bodies of men like Ben in *Night of the Living Dead*, Vic in *A Boy and His Dog* (Jones 1975), Rick Deckard in *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), James Cole in *Twelve Monkeys* (Gilliam 1995) or any of the other postapocalyptic cowboys who find themselves living after the end of the world they knew. Matheson's legacy of privileging doubt over certainty is a bit like the vampires and zombies his fiction inspires: finding life in the wasteland may mean letting certain parts of ourselves die, but only so that we can reemerge into a different kind of world as different, potentially more alive, kinds of people.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Return to Normal: Negotiating Risk and Connection in the *Zombie Apocalypse*

Though the figure itself is much older than Matheson's novel, *I Am Legend* did much to codify the modern zombie figure, and zombie fiction has, in many ways, continued Matheson's critique of heroic masculine identity in connection with community. Since it first shambled into the American imagination, the figure of the zombie has served as a reminder of the risks involved in community. Associated as it is with discourses of immunity and infection, the zombie speaks to the difficulty of balancing the contradictory demands of security and connection that govern the relationship between the individual and the community, a relationship that can skew into either a dystopian emphasis on security or a dehumanizing envelopment of the individual by community.<sup>27</sup> As it is imagined in contemporary popular culture, the zombie has often come to represent an unbearable fullness of community, the claustrophobic fate of being entirely subjected to communal dangers without individual boundaries or filters. Concomitantly, it is a monstrous figure for the absolute absence of any sense of togetherness between individuals that might render up a collective able to sustain (political) life.

Due in no small part to its emphasis on communal risk, zombie fiction has become an intensely critical space in popular culture since the events of 11 September 2001, particularly in the American imagination. The motifs of defense and infection that are central to zombie fiction now appear across a range of cultural, social and political contexts, and it is this question of negotiating risk that is at the heart of the infectiousness of zombie fiction. This theme appears

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<sup>27</sup> Despite its wide-ranging associations with security, community is also a concept deeply imbricated in violence, both from without and from within. See also Esposito's comments in *Terms of the Political* 123-132.

not only in contemporary zombie fiction, but also as a recurring element of zombie fiction during and after the 1950s.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, zombie fiction is one of the key cultural legacies of Matheson.

Representations of the zombie in western popular culture generally follow three periods or waves, each corresponding to an evolving set of critical and stylistic concerns. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz point out, “Responding to the specific technological and cultural anxieties of each historical era, the evolution of the modern figure of the zombie can be roughly divided into...the Haitian voodoo zombie, George Romero’s living dead, and the pathologized, infected humans who behave *as if they were living dead*...” (3, emphasis original). In each of these phases, zombie fiction’s representation of the protagonist has also evolved, from a heroically masculine redemptive figure (Neil Parker in *White Zombie*), to one excluded by the status quo (Ben in *Night of the Living Dead*), to a revisionary version of the heroic protagonist who eschews “normal life” in favor of alternative forms of togetherness and connection (Jim in *28 Days Later* and “R” in *Warm Bodies*).

Zombie fiction has remained a focal point in cultural explorations of the nature of personhood and subjectivity in recent years, especially as the concepts of biopolitics have become increasingly applicable in political policies governing the relationship between the (American) state and its various others. As Sherryl Vint argues, “Liberal philosophy...has focused its energy on differentiating between binaries, specifically that between lives that matter and those that do not in biopolitical configurations...the crucial criterion is a biopolitics that becomes about a policing of norms” (“Biodialectics” 93). In much the same way, the zombie

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<sup>28</sup> Two recent collections of essays explore this resurgence in detail. These are *Better Off Dead*, eds. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro; and *Generation Zombie*, eds. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz.

belongs to an ongoing exploration of heroic masculinity and its place in the negotiation of identity and difference.

In the history of zombie fiction, the zombie figure's uncomfortably physical and abject status has served to emphasize the materiality of the body, as well as the zones of disjunction that invariably exist between political ideals of identity and the everyday lives of real individuals living in community. As an allegory for the risks of connection, the zombie has been used more frequently to open a space for considering the negative consequences of abstract political ideology and abstract iterations of the biopolitical norm—one need only think of the constellation of terms “the war on terror” to map these consequences. And, coupled with these concerns, the zombie (nearly) always appears in a matrix of connections with the normative masculine protagonist.

Moreover, zombie fiction has often served to chart the ways in which such abstractions succeed both in increasing the importance of security and diminishing the available possibilities for meaningful social and political connection between self and other.<sup>29</sup> Such alternatives have increasingly taken shape not in the figure of the zombie but rather in the figure of the heroic protagonist, who most directly must learn to balance the demands of security and connection. In this way, the key examples of post-1945 zombie fiction discussed in this chapter—examples that begin with George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*—offer a continuation of the critique of normative, heroic masculinity evident in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*. Moreover, these works of zombie fiction, together with examples cited from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, serve to contextualize the popularity and importance of zombie fiction after 9/11.

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<sup>29</sup> See also Negri and Hardt's discussion of the shift from defense to security that has accompanied U.S. foreign policy since 9/11 in *Multitude* 20.

In popular zombie narrative after Romero, the human survivors resort to all manner of security measures, including hiding themselves away behind monolithic walls, in fortified urban malls, in besieged farmhouses. In each case, these structures come to represent any number of metaphorical boundaries keeping safe the distinction between identity and difference. In this way, contemporary zombie fiction (as with other forms of postapocalyptic narrative) echoes the dialectic of connection and security at play in Matheson's *Legend*. In Matheson's novel, the lone protagonist, Robert Neville, is kept safe by his immunity to the apocalyptic plague that affects everyone else. However, this immunity, as a final irrevocable boundary, also excludes him from the meaningful connection that those affected by the plague eventually find. Although Neville is in this way secured from risk—and from the tidal changes required of others—his security turns to isolation so intense as to become unbearable (Neville ultimately dies by his own hand, after all). Similarly, the repeated of images of security—the walls, fences and fortresses that survivors use to protect themselves from zombies—invariably fail. Not only is this the case in any number of texts, but, as with Neville, such boundaries prove to be more harmful than protective. Risking connection appears as a more hopeful alternative than the relentless pursuit of security.

In Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), perhaps the most influential zombie film produced since 2001, the correlation between risk and connection is articulated in the film's repetitive use of the word "hello," both in dialogue and onscreen. As in the opening sequence of George Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985), the term appears in the context of connection as well as risk. In *Day of the Dead*, shouts of hello only manage to raise the dangerous attention of the film's insatiable zombies. In *28 Days Later*, by turn, the film's penultimate sequence features a surrealistic quick-cut image of an English hillside bearing the word "hell" in large block letters. This word, the final sequence of the film reveals, is only a partial rendering of a signal the film's



survivors have constructed to attract the attention of their eventual rescuers. However, the juxtaposition of hell/o in this context connects the film's exploration of the relationship between the individual and community not only to larger cultural and political discourses but also to a theme that threads its way throughout zombie fiction, from Matheson and Romero to Boyle and many others.<sup>30</sup>

The relationship between identity and difference is inherently risky, yet without embracing this risk and exposing identity to an interface with what is different, life becomes static, ceases to adapt to larger changes, and ultimately ceases altogether to be meaningful—it becomes, in other words, zombie life. Balancing risk and connection is exceedingly difficult, and in all the images of security, infection, immunity, and community that pervade zombie fiction, connection to others remains both desirable and threatening for the survivors (and, in films such as *Day of the Dead* and *Warm Bodies* [2013], for the zombies as well). And, although zombie fiction has traditionally focused on the figure of the zombie as the embodiment of all the abject horrors of communal risk, it is the figure of the survivor that interests me here, for it is the survivor—often cast as the heroically masculine protagonist—that repeatedly poses the question of how to balance the risk posed by community with the individual's ceaseless demand for meaningful connection with others.

In a number of recent zombie narratives, the process of balancing security and connection succeeds because of a willingness of on the part of (non)traditional heroes to move beyond a simple defense of the status quo and embrace instead the seemingly monstrous changes facing them. Whereas Neville, in Matheson's *Legend*, cannot seem to move beyond his own systems of

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<sup>30</sup> This juxtaposition also invokes Sartre's famous statement, "Hell is other people." Of this, Roberto Esposito writes, "[This] is to say that others—namely, the community itself—are a hell for every "I." What frightens human beings is a lack of boundaries, which places them in direct contact with others who are so similar the them..." (*Terms* 125).

identification, zombie fiction after *Legend* increasingly features masculine protagonists who are willing to risk themselves in the pursuit of new ways of being together with and valuing others. In the recent film adaptation of Max Brooks' *World War Z*, for instance, the survival of community follows from protagonist Gerry Lane's (Brad Pitt) willingness to embrace weakness (on the biological level, at least) as way of defending against the zombie threat. Lane discovers that the film's voracious zombies only hunt and kill the strongest humans; by inoculating himself with a concoction of various infections, Lane finds a new way of survival, one that literally refuses the notion that absolute strength is the only way to defend identity.

This instance recalls Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*: "Can we find another meaning, and another possibility, for the decentering of the first-person narrative...to consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others" (7). As Negri and Hardt write, "[it's] not just a matter of being different, but also of becoming different" (356). If the filmic adaptations of *I Am Legend* fail to capture the critique of the status quo that is central to the novel, a good deal of the zombie fiction that grows from Matheson's work not only preserves but also elaborates this critique, increasingly focusing on protagonists who are willing to "become different" in order to escape the violent norms of the status quo.

The correlation of risk and connection visible in *I Am Legend* and *28 Days Later* recalls contemporary biopolitical articulations of community that recognize a reciprocal relationship between identity and difference. As Roberto Esposito points out, community often exists as a force that exposes individual identity (or, in the broader sense, national identity) "to a contact with, and also a contagion by, an other that is potentially dangerous" (*Terms* 49). At the same time, however, such contact also serves to limit the intensification of a particular identity beyond what is tenable—an intensification that results, for instance, in increasingly reductive visions of

normative identity, as in the classic dystopias like Zamyatin's *We*, in which identity is reduced to what is mathematically quantifiable or imminently rational in the state's inimical quest to make the collective identity match an impossible ideal. Community exposes identity to difference, but it also allows for a continued exchange and openness between self and other, an exchange that is vital to continued social and political life (Esposito, *Communitas* 7).

Contemporary zombie fiction is in many ways a cultural inheritance from Richard Matheson, especially given his influence on George Romero. The zombie, however, had been living dead on the pages, radios and movie screens of American popular culture long before Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the film widely regarded as a turning point in zombie mythology (Boon 5). The figure of the zombie, in fact, first rises from the grave and into the American imagination in William Seabrook's *The Mysterious Island* (1929)—before this point, “The term ‘zombie’ was virtually unknown outside Haiti” (Kee 13). In the interregnum between Seabrook and Romero, the zombie becomes an interesting allegorical figure in cultural discourses about identity, mastery and otherness in a variety of genres—not only novel and film, but also radio drama and stage plays. Moreover, the zombie's initial establishment in popular culture coincides with a turning point in the national narrative, a time of significant cultural, social and economic upheaval during which many in America were in the process of rearticulating their perceived relationship to the rest of the world (Kee 14). Indeed, this seems to make a certain kind of sense in retrospect, given the ubiquity of the figure of the zombie after 9/11.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Recent examples of zombie fiction are ubiquitous in popular culture, ranging from the highly popular AMC series, *The Walking Dead* to the campy Seth Graham-Smith novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: The Classic Regency Romance – Now with Ultraviolet Zombie Mayhem!*.

Zombie fiction, in a way that mirrors other narrative forms that explore the binary between man and monster, has traditionally privileged the (mostly American) cultural norms of white masculinity as an ideal form of political personhood. The earliest American zombie narratives borrowed associations with Haiti and voodoo to produce both a racialized and gendered norm. Early zombies were popularized across a range of media, including stage plays (notably Kenneth Webb's 1932 play *Zombie*), radio productions and film.<sup>32</sup> And, as Boluk and Lenz point out, "Unlike the vampire or werewolf, the zombie does not have a long literary tradition preceding its emergence in film" (*Generation 3*). Early zombie cinema, therefore, became especially important to the popularization of the genre. Films such as *White Zombie* (1932), *Ouanga* (1935), *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), *The Ghost Breakers* (1940), *King of the Zombies* (1941), and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) all contributed to the association of the zombie with an imperiled "civilized" status quo (Boon 7; Kee 13). And, if the figure of the zombie represented otherness in a binary relationship between civilized and uncivilized, no figure stood to represent the imagined American self better than the heroically masculine, white protagonist (Kee 20-21).

This first wave of zombie cinema corresponds with both the American occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and the American Great Depression.<sup>33</sup> In this cultural context, the figure of the zombie served to represent a matrix of anxieties about identity that entered the national narrative during this period of political and economic upheaval (Kee 9). Confronted by a suddenly altered world, audiences of zombie cinema could imaginatively participate in the recuperation of the status quo (a recuperation that often happened through violence directed at the other). Moreover,

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<sup>32</sup> See also essays by Kee and Hand.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between science fiction and colonialism, see Rieder.

in the diegetic configuration of the zombie narrative, the fate of the protagonist becomes representative of the (imagined) situation of the community as a whole.

The earliest iterations of the zombie figure, based as they were on popular representations of Haiti and voodoo, cast the zombie as the victim of (an)other's malevolent influence, often a zombie master able to mysteriously bend others to his will. In *White Zombie*, this is precisely the role played by Bela Lugosi, a voodoo master who touts his power over the undead bodies of those who opposed him when they were living. Lugosi plays Murder Legendre, an exotic figure not far removed from Dracula and that monster's association with violation and corruption of the dominant norm.<sup>34</sup> *White Zombie* follows the case of Neil Parker (John Harron) and his young bride-to-be, Madeline (Madge Bellamy) as they travel to Haiti to be married. Shortly after their marriage, however, Madeleine falls under Murder's power, becoming a zombie version of her former self. In the end, it falls to Neil, with the help of the plucky local missionary, to defeat Murder and his zombies and rescue Madeleine from a fate ostensibly worse than death.

*White Zombie* exemplifies an enduring attention to gender and power structures in zombie fiction. Though the trope of the imperiled white woman was widely common in American culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a means of reinforcing normative white masculinity (especially, for instance, in the literature of the American South), the visibly monstrous nature of the zombie figure made it all that much easier for audiences to indulge the fantasy of violence against those who were different. In early films like *White Zombie*, for instance, the imperiled woman was often presented as inveterately powerless against the violations of the zombie master, reduced, as with Madeleine's character in *White Zombie*, to a husk of a person, with the bodily appearance of a woman but none of the soul that would mark her as a properly Cartesian

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<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, Halberstam's discussion of the figure of Dracula in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*.

subject. This passivity contributed to the reinforcement of heroic white masculinity as the political norm against which those of a different race or gender were imaginatively measured, and the relationship between ostensibly powerful men and passive or imperiled women remains a central theme in contemporary zombie cinema, with female characters often conceived as resources to be controlled.

Writing of the stage play *Zombie*, Kee argues, “*Zombie* and the zombie fiction that would follow postulated that there was a solution to the zombie problem, that things could be returned to normal. The white male could defeat black ‘corruption’; the white female could be saved” (15). In this division between male agency and female passivity, early zombie fiction emphasized both a gendered and racialized ideal that became a supposed symbol for “normal life.” In the drive to “return to normal,” as Kee puts it, early zombie fiction gave imaginative play to a violent and nostalgic representation of the relationship between identity and difference, one in which proper identity need only be defended against that which would alter it. There was, in this sense, no need to risk connection. Indeed, given the artistic and political limits of early cinema, representing a break with the status quo as anything but threatening and undesirable may have been simply impossible. That possibility notwithstanding, the role of the heroic masculine protagonist that was codified in films like *White Zombie* long remained central to the fantasy of social, cultural, and political reinvigoration that early zombie fiction demonstrates.

If the primary cultural work of early zombie fiction was to reinforce a dominant identity in the American imagination during a period of social, political and economic upheaval, this fiction also contained the earliest traces of another, altogether different theme. If the nostalgic power of the heroic protagonist in early zombie fiction was, at least on one level, his ability to return life to normal, this return never marked a complete recuperation. As with the ending of *White*

*Zombie*, in which Neil and Madeline embrace while the smiling missionary looks on, the return to normal always tends to bring its abject opposite with it (Kee 21-23). A sense of doubt hangs over the whole notion, and it is this sense of doubt—not only about the fantasy of recuperation but also about the tenability of a normalized status quo in general—that becomes increasingly visible in later zombie fiction as the figure of the heroic male protagonist is more forcefully called into doubt and as female characters become less passive and in need of rescue.

As zombie fiction moved away from its association with Haiti and voodoo, it privileged less and less a valorization of the status quo, and with this alteration came substantial changes in both the figure of the zombie and the figure of the heroic protagonist. Nick Mutean argues:

Whereas one of the principle terrors in the Voudou *Zombie* narratives was the loss of self-control and self-identity through the imposition of the will of another individual, the modern zombie is terrifying precisely because no singular agent acts to possess the victim's mind. Rather it is society itself—the very same cultural, ideological, and material institutions through which an individual realizes him- or herself as subject—that is ultimately responsible for the zombie's terrifying dehumanization (83).

In this sense, as contemporary zombie fiction increasingly turns toward a critique not (only) of otherness but (also) of dominant norms of identification, the figure of the heroic protagonist, who once sought to master the other and defend the status quo, begins to seem more and more suspect, untenable, and even dangerous. As in Matheson's depiction of Neville, whose relentless efforts to secure a "normal" life for himself become incredibly destructive, the notion of absolute immunity from change, risk or difference becomes inseparably linked both to unbearable loneliness and to unthinkable violence. This trend reflects a coextensive loss of faith in the dominant narrative and foreshadows the political disruptions of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In this vein, second-wave zombie fiction, in many ways a product of the long 1950s, increasingly subverts the diegetic configurations of earlier zombie fiction. If zombie fiction during the depression was intimately concerned with orchestrating a return to normal, this

changes with Romero's first two *Dead* films: *Night of the Living Dead*, a film that presents "normal" social relations as devastatingly violent, and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), a film that shows the status quo to be both violent and devastatingly boring. Kevin Boon points out, "Discourse in contemporary popular American culture concerning zombie mythology is colored by George Romero's fusion of the zombie and the ghoul in his monumental film *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. Nearly every film made after Romero's first sequel... can be linked back to Romero's characterization of the zombie" (5). In a formal sense, then, Romero removes the figure of the zombie master from his films altogether, and the majority of zombie narratives after 1968 follow a similar pattern.

No longer is the zombie narrative focused solely on eliminating the source of the threat; rather, the risk posed by the zombie is that it (as a kind of plague) will reveal normal life for how tedious, tenuous and superficial it can be. In this way, Romero privileges doubt about the true value of the status quo over any fantasy of mastery (Moreland 83), and in this privileging, he preserves Matheson's critique of normative heroic masculinity more than perhaps any other artist.

As Boluk and Lenz point out, zombies after Romero begin to take on the even more uncertain epistemology of disease, "and their model of contagion is dependent on a social model of interpenetration and connectivity" ("Infection" 135). Indeed, in his *Dead* films, Romero foregrounds the idea that identity is anything but stable. In the liturgy of contagion that marks much of contemporary zombie fiction, surviving is hardly ever merely about defending identity from contagion or alteration by the risks of community. It often appears instead, as the work of balancing risk with the *necessity* of connection. As Romero has said, "My stories have always been people stories, the zombies are an annoyance. It's all about people, how they address the



situation, or fail to address it” (qtd. in Moreland 85). In Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead* (1985), the fate of the community no longer rests with the representatives of the status quo, but instead with those who are willing to abandon it in search of something potentially better. This shift is particularly visible in Romero’s critical treatment of heroic masculinity, which always appears deeply suspect in the *Dead* films when the male protagonist is aligned with dominant social norms (Rhodes, the maniacal soldier from *Day of the Dead* is the premier example of this treatment). Indeed, Romero favors protagonists who fall outside cultural norms.

Ben, the doomed hero of *Night of the Living Dead*, offers a clear example of Romero’s treatment of the concept of “normal,” particularly in that, even as Ben is the true hero of the film, he suffers not because of the zombies but because he falls outside the boundaries of “normal.” *Night of the Living Dead* follows the exploits of a small group of people as they struggle to survive the night in an abandoned farmhouse, besieged by a horde of undead, flesh-eating zombies. In a way that resonates with *I Am Legend*, it is not the zombies outside that really threaten those inside the farmhouse; rather, it is the seemingly unshakable obsession each of the survivors has with their own sense of “normal” identity, especially as it relates to their relationships with and power over each other. As Sean Moreland writes, “...the horror of Romero’s films has, from *Night* onward, resided not in the dead, both horrific and pathetic...but with the living humans of the narratives, who, consistent with Matheson’s novel, fail to adapt to their radically transformed environments” (85). If zombie fiction repeatedly explores the correlation between risk and meaningful connection, *Night of the Living Dead* focuses in particular on its characters’ failure to move beyond the learned social norms that they believe

govern their connections to each other. Unable to imagine alternative forms of connection, they spell their own doom.

As Sean Moreland points out, in *Night of the Living Dead*, “human connection leads invariably to violent death” (83). Indeed, the film focuses on the dissolution of several of the most intimate forms of connection (husband/wife, mother/daughter, lover/beloved) and broadens its focus to less intimate but equally foundational sorts of bonds (friend/neighbor, legal subject/legal authority). *Night of the Living Dead* opens with a sequence that follows two siblings, Barbara (Judith O’Dea) and Johnny (Russell Streiner), as they drive to the countryside to visit the grave of a lost loved one. The scene plays on various gothic motifs, Johnny famously teasing his skittish sister, “They’re coming to get you, Barbara!” Shortly after this, however, Johnny is attacked by one of Romero’s ghoul/zombies. Barbara flees to a nearby farmhouse, where she encounters Ben (Duane Jones), a young black man who has also taken shelter there. As Ben works to adapt to the situation, boarding up the house and finding ways to make the shelter more secure for the night, Barbara remains shocked and unresponsive. The two are eventually joined by other survivors (including a father, mother, and daughter) who had been hiding in the basement of the farmhouse. As efforts to escape or attract rescue fail, tensions rise between the survivors, especially between Ben and Harry (Karl Hardman), whose objections to Ben’s ad hoc leadership of the group seem to be largely racial. Eventually, efforts to defend the farmhouse fail and the survivors destroy each other. Ben kills Harry (twice). Barbara dies at the hands of her brother, zombie Johnny. Harry’s wife dies when her daughter becomes a zombie. Ben, finally, is killed by the local sheriff and his men as they attempt to restore order.

One of the key problems facing the characters in *Night of the Living Dead* is that the survivors cannot recognize that their world has radically changed. Nor can they adjust adequately

for that change. Deborah Christie writes, “The chilling final scene of *Night of the Living Dead*—where the bodies of the first zombie we saw on-screen and the last human to survive the night in the farmhouse are both shown being tossed into the fire by the sheriff and his men—demonstrates most clearly the flaws of human judgment and its ability to discern its own capacity for inhuman behavior...” (80). Indeed, *Night of the Living Dead* critiques the capacity of normalized models of identification to allow for meaningful, adaptive interface with those who are different or who fall outside those models. The drive to protect a static configuration of social relationships (as with Harry and Ben) inexorably produces violence, ironically, all in the name of protecting life. Moreover, the film is suffused with the sense that most, if not all of this violence might have been avoided had the characters (up to and including the sheriff) be able to consider their situation from a perspective other than fear and a concern for their own status.

In the characters’ relentless efforts to maintain the status quo, they preclude the possibility of recognizing alternative ways of reacting to their predicament. Christie goes on to say:

*Night of the Living Dead* dramatizes the bewildering and uncanny transformation of human beings into nonhuman forms. Yet the most callous treatment of the human form is not the result of a zombie attack, at least not directly; Ben, weary and dispirited, sits visibly motionless at day break, as the local sheriff and his men approach the house, indiscriminately killing all the zombies in their path. Our survivor, Ben, is no longer recognizable as human, and he is shot and killed by the sheriff (79-80).

Indeed, it is the sheriff, in this context, who represents the normative position of the traditional hero as he traipses around the county killing not just zombies but also apparently anyone he (mis)identifies as abnormal. Indeed, the sheriff’s efforts to return the county to normal—through organized, methodical violence—cost Ben his life because he can no longer be recognized as belonging to that norm, although he is still very much alive. In the end, *Night of the Living Dead* inverts the traditional ending carried out in such films as *White Zombie*, and, although the sheriff

and his men succeed (nominally and temporarily) in returning life to normal, the film's ending calls that status quo into question, rather than genuinely reaffirming it. Rescue, when it finally arrives, seems to be no better a fate than becoming a zombie.

If *Night of the Living Dead* gestures toward the violent and exclusionary undercurrents present in the concept of “normal,” Romero's second *Dead* film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) locates a tentative hope in the possibility of forming meaningful connections that go beyond the prescribed norms of identity and community in order to discover alternative forms of togetherness, even in the presence of risk (Moreland 83). *Dawn of the Dead* tells the story of four people—Stephen (David Emge), Peter (Ken Foree), Roger (Scott H. Reiniger) and Fran (Gaylen Ross)—as they struggle to survive in the zombie apocalypse by hiding out in a shopping mall. The basic premise is much the same as *Night of the Living Dead*—though Romero does succeed in addressing the sheer boredom of the late-capitalist status quo. And, though the survivors manage to cooperate better in *Dawn of the Dead* than Ben and his comrades, their refuge is eventually beset and overrun, not by the zombies that congregate outside the mall but by a marauding motorcycle gang intent on overtaking the survivors' hideout. In the end, only two of the survivors—Fran and Peter—escape the gang-members and the zombies, but this flight is ambiguous: as the two leave from the roof of the mall in a helicopter, Peter asks Fran, “How much fuel do we have?” And Fran answers, “Not much.” Peter simply laughs and says, “Alright.”

Sean Moreland argues that *Dawn of the Dead* adopts a somewhat more hopeful and “satiric/speculative” perspective than *Night of the Living Dead*, “...with its vituperative treatment of capitalist greed, racial hatred, and the dependence on petroleum fuels, but also in its final celebration of the possibility of forming new social groups and interpersonal connections

(as Fran and Peter's co-operative survival suggests). This register is painfully absent from *Night's* entirely negative symphony..." (83). Indeed, what is particularly interesting about the ambiguous ending of *Dawn of the Dead* is the fact that the film does not remove the context of risk—Fran and Peter may very well be headed toward a different, even more terrifying fate (this is exactly the case in Zack Snyder's 2004 remake of *Dawn*), but it nevertheless celebrates their decision to give up the fight for the status quo and valorizes their willingness to embrace risk in the hope of finding new possibilities for life. In other words, even as the film critiques what Mutean calls the "terrifying dehumanization" caused by cultural, social and political norms, it also hints at the promise of different kind of future (83). Additionally, whereas *Night of the Living Dead* presented the possibility of returning to normal as conceivable, if costly, *Dawn of the Dead* forecloses this possibility entirely, suggesting that the only way to survive is to accept the risks associated with new kinds of connection. There is no prototypical hero in *Dawn of the Dead* who might save the day.

*Day of the Dead* (1985) continues Romero's *Dead* cycle and also his emphasis on the violence inherent in attempting to maintain normal social structures. As Kim Paffenroth argues, *Day of the Dead* "takes the themes of zombie/human identity and the greater dangers posed by humans to their logical extremes" (21). As in *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*, the characters' attachment to the status quo—especially to their own power over others—proves to be more damaging and more dangerous to meaningful connection than the risk posed by the zombies.

*Day of the Dead* features a number of key male characters, and each becomes representative of a particular norm of identification (as well as a particular norm of masculinity). There is first of all Rhodes (Joe Pilato), a maniacal military man in charge of the survivors' base.

Rhodes appears on screen with all the masculine, tough-guy swagger contemporary audiences might have associated with Charlton Heston, but his paranoia and proclivity for violence belie his heroic exterior—as he descends into sadism, he becomes an open satire of the traditional military figure (such that his final destruction at the hands of zombies risks its own kind of perverse pleasure). If Rhodes is a parody of the traditional hero, Logan (Richard Liberty), is a truly mad scientist bent on taming the zombie threat through domestication. Indeed, Logan's ministrations over the zombies on his operating table make for some of the film's most disturbing scenes. In the end, all of Logan's claims toward rationally understanding the zombie appear empty as it becomes more and more apparent that Logan himself is not only irrational but also entirely psychotic.

Between these two masculine figures, each of which represent, in their own ways, the violence of the status quo, Romero privileges the character of John (Terry Alexander), a Jamaican helicopter pilot who ostentatiously values pleasure and togetherness over the others' efforts to return life to normal. The audience's sympathies easily gravitate toward John, who is markedly different than the others (his racial difference pointedly reinforced by his accent). When, inevitably, all hell breaks loose, it is John who orchestrates an escape. As in *Dawn of the Dead*, Romero again privileges alternative solutions to human togetherness, as Sarah, John and McDermott (Jarlath Conroy) escape together into an uncertain future, but one far preferable to what they had just escaped.

George Romero's *Dead* cycle served to establish the zombie film as an important cultural site for the imagination of alternative ways of balancing security and connection. Since September 2001, zombie fiction has played a critical role in not only addressing the anxieties associated with 9/11 but also confronting the increased emphasis on security that has been one of

the most far-reaching consequences of the war on terror (Negri and Hardt 20). This confrontation has often taken the shape of a reevaluation of the traditional hero figure (one deeply associated with American political identity). As such, the repeated trope of revisionary protagonists visible in zombie fiction since Romero has become a key component in the development of alternative narratives of identity and community.

One of the first zombie films to demonstrate this shift is Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002). Set in a decimated England, after a virus called *rage* has wreaked havoc on the fabric of normal life—and turned its victims into the enraged, zombie-like *infected*—*28 Days Later* follows a small band of survivors as they travel toward (what they expect will be) safety. Following a typical postapocalyptic narrative strategy, the film opens with a pre-credit sequence, which explains the origins of the deadly rage virus: In an animal testing laboratory at Cambridge, scientists are working to understand the rage virus, which the audience is left to believe the scientists have also engineered. Unfortunately for everyone involved, a group of animal-rights activists ransack the lab and unknowingly release the virus. After the impressively frenetic and bloody moments of the first and second infections of humans (the activists themselves), the film goes dark and cuts to a shot of a lone figure on a hospital bed. This is Jim (Cillian Murphy), the film's protagonist.

Jim awakens in an empty hospital. He is naked, and half his head has been shaved. He finds his door locked, but also finds a key has been slid under the door. Wrapped in a set of ill-fitting scrubs, Jim walks out of the hospital and into an empty London. In the much-acclaimed sequence that follows, Boyle tracks Jim through the lonely and disheveled urban spaces of London—this same sort of sequence appears to great effect in many postapocalyptic narratives, from *I Am Legend* (2007) to *The Walking Dead* (2010). During his walking tour, Jim stops at a

news kiosk and reads old newspapers scattered there (a nod to Romero's *Dead* films). The film even puns on the old millenarian proclamation, "The End is Nigh!": at one point in Jim's exploration of the newly refashioned London, he walks into a church, and there, scrawled in blood on the wall, is an apt slogan for the apocalyptic city: "The End is Extremely Fucking Nigh!"

Inside the church, Jim finally encounters the infected—Boyle's version of a zombie, dramatically different from Romero's shambling ghouls. Jamie Russell wittily describes Boyle's infected as "raging, fast-moving, highly contagious maniacs who have been transformed by the virus into a cross between rabid epileptics and psychotic Ebola carriers" (179). (Boyle may have also inadvertently inaugurated the abiding popular culture debate surrounding fast zombies/ slow zombies.) When an infected priest attacks Jim, he hits the man (who was trying to eat him), but immediately apologizes—a small moment that emphasizes just how deeply engrained is Jim's sense of social propriety.

*28 Days Later* is a film deeply interested in the question of how to negotiate the risks involved in connecting with others—a connection that requires a concomitant relaxing of security and the normal boundaries of identity. Nicole LaRose writes, "*28 Days Later* critiques the attempt to maintain an ideal of British statehood and identity by equating the institutions of control, especially the church and military, with the rage that has infected society" (172). Moreover, the film obliquely addresses America's place in the world—both geographically and as a political power. At one point in the film, a character muses that Americans must be sitting comfortably at home, watching *The Simpsons*, while the plague rages in the United Kingdom. In this way, film also critiques a particular vision of American national identity as self-serving and disinterested.



Against “ideal British statehood,” *28 Days Later* celebrates an articulation of identity and community that values connection above protection. This is best seen in Jim’s character, in his insistence to risk his own safety for others. Early in *28 Days Later*, as Jim flees from the infected, he is rescued by a Molotov-cocktail wielding woman named Selena (Naomie Harris). Together, they meet other survivors, a father and daughter named Frank (Brendan Gleeson) and Hannah (Megan Burns). These four form a provisional family, a community based on common risk, but also on common desire for togetherness. This point is made clear in an exchange between Selena and Jim:

Jim says of Frank and Hannah: “I think they’re good people.”

Selena replies: “Good people? Well, that’s nice. But you should be more concerned about whether or not they’re going to slow you down.”

Jim: “Oh, right, because if they slowed you down...”

Selena: “I’d leave them behind.”

Jim: “Well, I wouldn’t.”

Selena: “Then you’re going to wind up getting yourself killed.”

Unknown to Jim or Selena, Hannah overhears their conversation and later says: “It isn’t true...you need us just as much as we need you. We need each other.” And it is this notion, the abiding need for meaningful connection, that serves as the group’s guiding principle.

Eventually, the survivors receive a recorded radio message promising a cure for the infection—this promise comes from the military and seems viable. However, the promise turns out to be a misleading message from Major Henry West (Christopher Eccleston and his men. West’s men “rescue” the survivors—but not before Frank is infected and killed—and take them to a walled compound. West’s “cure” is nothing more than increased security and military order. West confides in Jim that he has promised his soldiers women, so that he and his men can rebuild civilization from the ground up. He also tells Jim that, no matter their feelings on the matter, Selena and Hannah are to become the women of the house (in all the violent ways that

euphemism implies), mothers to a revitalized England. West's treatment of Selena and Hannah echoes the treatment of the passive figure of Madeline in *White Zombie*: like Murder, West intends the women to behave as passive resources for his own ends, and he thinks of their bodies accordingly, as sites of ownership.

However insane their characters seem (West, indeed, also harkens back to Rhodes in Romero's *Day of the Dead*), West and his men function as representatives of the same dominant political and social order that first created the virus and ruined the world. Before the plague, they were the functionaries of legitimate law, the ultimate keepers of the rules, and this sense of their own status feeds directly into their belief that they have every right to use Selena's and Hannah's bodies as they see fit. Not surprisingly, Jim's reaction to West's plan is to attempt to escape with Selena and Hannah. He fails and is taken prisoner; West's soldiers lead him to a mass grave, a vast pile of bodies of the infected that the soldiers have killed, intending to execute him, his sentence having been spoken into law by West. In a moment of distraction, however, Jim eludes the soldiers by hiding amidst the bodies of the infected—symbolically becoming one of them—and then escapes over the wall of the compound. In this moment, the film's investment in the value of abandoning the status quo becomes clear: Jim finally understands that the rules he has lived by for so long will fail him (indeed, try to kill him) as soon as he deviates from their limits. In order to survive, he breaks through the boundaries of the “normal” order. He does this not by reaffirming his own privileged position in the status quo but instead by occupying the same space as the infected: relegated to the pit, jettisoned outside the walls of normal.

Directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo and produced by Boyle, *28 Weeks Later* (2007) follows the efforts of a NATO task force as they work to repopulate London after the events of *28 Days Later*. Though a less accomplished film than Boyle's, *28 Weeks Later* also addresses the

relationship between connection and risk. Indeed, community is closely associated with violence in the film. As American special forces work alongside military scientists to tightly control the repopulation of London, the plague reemerges when a woman, Alice (Catherine McCormack), who has been living in the ruins of London—apparently uninfected—reconnects with her husband Don (Robert Carlyle) and her two children. As in *Night of the Living Dead*, these close social trust relationships result in terrible violence, tied as they are to the maintenance of the status quo. Unbeknownst to Don, Alice is a carrier of the rage virus, and when they kiss, he is infected and subsequently touches off a second wave of the epidemic. The military, unable to control the outbreak, reacts by attempting to kill everyone in “District One” in order to secure the rest of London. When they fail, the virus spreads globally.

*28 Weeks Later* illustrates not only the risk involved in connection but also the inadequacy of efforts to “return to normal.” Unlike Jim, Selena and Hannah, who manage to survive by eschewing security and embracing risk, the efforts of the soldiers in *28 Weeks Later* to secure a return to normal actually only serve to create the conditions necessary for the virus’ emergence and intensification, marking, as it were, a large-scale failure to adapt to a changing reality. Moreover, the film demonstrates that efforts to secure the status quo devolve into violence as soon as it proves impossible to keep difference at bay.

Beyond this, *28 Weeks Later* also serves to more overtly connect Boyle’s vision of a postapocalyptic world to the post-9/11 political landscape. It does this in no small part by emphasizing the role of American military soldiers in the events of the film. In the sequel, however, the film revolves around the spectacle of American intervention. The film’s repeated images of military blockades and checkpoints, of snipers patrolling rooftops and helicopters surveying the city all provide parallels to American interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the

same time, these images provide a tonal dissonance that accentuates the duality of the NATO forces: it is never clear, from the beginning of the film until the soldiers actually begin killing civilians, whether the military is there to protect or to police the survivors. Here, the drive to maintain a sense of normality, whatever the cost, seems to be a distinctly American trait.<sup>35</sup>

A counterpoint to these narratives is Joss Whedon's *Serenity* (2004), a film that adapts the notion of the zombie and the traditional hero to a critique of the status quo on the level of population. The film builds on Whedon's short-lived but highly acclaimed television series *Firefly* (2002-03). This series imagines a future human culture that has spread into space after the ecological collapse of the earth, to settle a number of terra-formed planets. These planets are ruled, in the wake of a costly civil war, by The Alliance. The series' protagonist, Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion), is a former settler who fought on the "wrong" side of the war, as it is reckoned from the perspective of the alliance center, and laments, even disturbs when he can, the idea of Alliance control.

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<sup>35</sup> *28 Weeks Later* shares several similarities with Colson Whitehead's novel *Zone One* (2011), which tells the story of American efforts to reclaim Manhattan (the Zone One of the title) after a zombie plague has ravaged the country. As in *28 Weeks Later*, American efforts to return things to normal fail. As the novel ends, the defensive wall set up around Zone One falls, and zombies begin to overtake the city. Whitehead narrates protagonist Mark Spitz's contemplation of the situation: "He'd always wanted to live in New York but that city didn't exist anymore. He didn't know if the world was doomed or saved, but whatever the next thing was, it would not look like what came before... The world wasn't ending: it had ended and now they were in a new place. They did not recognize it because they had never seen it before" (257-8). This realization, that the future would be anything but a return to normal, informs the closing pages of the novel, when, faced with overwhelming odds and little chance of survival, Mark Spitz seems to accept his fate: "Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead" (259). Such an ending recalls Robert Neville's epiphany at the end of *I Am Legend*, the realization that the world no longer belong to him and could no longer be ordered according to his sense of what was normal. For a complete discussion, see Hoberek.

The narrative core of the show is Mal's ongoing quest to find an alternative way of living in the 'verse. To this end, Mal makes his home in a transport ship, which he names *Serenity*—after the location of the last battle, his battle, in the war of Unification (Canavan 181). Thus, *Serenity* becomes the figure of Mal's ongoing resistance to the Alliance and the way of life it fosters. A group of like-minded figures align themselves with Mal, becoming his fellow travelers not only in spirit but also literally. These are refugees from the “normal” world: Zoe, a woman who fought for independence alongside Mal; Wash, Zoe's quirky husband and the ship's pilot; Jane, a hired gun; Kaylee, the earthy engineer; Inara, a companion (the future equivalent of a geisha); Simon and River Tam, a brother and sister duo who are fugitives from the Alliance; and, finally, Shepard Book, a displaced preacher with a mysterious past. The unifying element in these disparate figures is that not one of them can be at peace in the “normal” world, either because their talents lay outside the limits of law or because they refuse to make peace with the ruling order of their day. In *Serenity* (the ship), they find an alternative sort of community.

*Serenity* illustrates the fantasy that security can be achieved through mediating subjectivity at the level of the body. This film explores the ways in which biopolitical norms—such as those which prove to be so fruitless in *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later*—and biopolitical visions of security attempt to model the entire social environment around an idealized norm, seeking not only to protect life in general but to produce a very specific kind of subjectivity for that life. Negri and Hardt argue that the reproduction of the status quo on the level of the subject is one of the hallmarks of contemporary biopolitical government. They write, “On one hand, political power is no longer simply oriented toward legislating norms and preserving order in public affairs but must bring into play the production of social relationships in all aspects of life... Together, in a sort of concert or convergence of the various forms of

power, war, politics, economics, and culture in Empire become finally a mode of producing social life in its entirety and hence a form of biopower” (334).

It is exactly this production of subjectivity that comes into focus in *Serenity*, where the drive to produce a particular form of subjectivity and identification goes horribly awry. (94). The world Whedon imagines in *Firefly* is a distinctly human one. Devoid of any alien life (a move that distinguishes the show from one of its progenitors, *Star Trek*), space in *Firefly* is peopled with another kind of monster: Reavers—zombies fitted for space. As Gerry Canavan parses it, “During one close call with a Reaver vessel, Zoe (Gina Torres) warns another that if the Reavers attack they will ‘rape us to death, eat our flesh and sew our skins into their clothing; and if we’re very, very lucky, they’ll do it in that order’ (*‘Serenity’*, 20 December 2002)” (185). The figure of the Reaver initially stands as the prototypical, traditional monster, but, like the zombie, the Reavers are closer to “normal” than they first appear.

The plot of *Serenity* revolves around Mal and company’s discovery of the origins of the Reavers. Through a series of events, Mal discovers that the Alliance is behind the creation of the Reavers, although this creation happened as an unexpected side-effect of another initiative. The viewer learns that in a failed attempt to create a perfect world—a world without violence, aggression or conflict—the Alliance settled a planet on the edges of known space, a planet called Miranda, and manipulated its population by introducing a chemical compound into the air supply. This compound, designed to encourage docility and compliance in the population, works only too well: the majority of the millions affected simply stop breathing. In a small percentage of the population, however, the exact opposite reaction happens—instead of creating a docile citizen, the drug creates the Reavers.

Armed with this knowledge, the crew of the *Serenity* sets out to share it with the rest of the ‘verse, in defiance of the Alliance. Mal tells his crew, “Somebody has to speak for these people...because sooner or later they’re [the Alliance] gonna swing back to the belief that they can make people better. Well, I don’t hold to that. I aim to misbehave.” In choosing this path, which ends, as all good space opera does, in a galactic battle between good and evil, Mal embraces the necessity of breaking the rules. He sides with the monster, seeing in its eyes his own, recognizing the kinship of the excluded and the dispossessed.

The notion of the survivor sharing a kinship with the zombie that is at the center of *Serenity* plays out in comedic register in two contemporary zombie romantic comedies: *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *Warm Bodies* (2013). In each of these comedies, the figures and motifs of Romero’s *Dead* films get played for laughs, emphasizing the fact that, by this point, zombie film is so deeply entrenched in the western imagination that parodies of the genre are possible. The films, however, no less preserve the same mistrust “returning to normal” as their more serious analogs. This mistrust is most evident in each film’s revisionary treatment of the heroic masculine protagonist. In *Shaun of the Dead*, the hero is an inveterate failure; in *Warm Bodies*, the hero is already a zombie.

*Shaun of the Dead* (2004) is a zombie comedy that focuses on the fate of Shaun (Simon Pegg) as he struggles to get his friends and family to safety in the midst of the zombie apocalypse. Shaun himself embodies the opposite of the traditional hero. As Lynn Pifer points out:

Shaun is, in fact, the anti-Rambo. He is not particularly strong or skilled in self-defense. He tries to arm himself with kitchen implements, record albums, a cricket bat, a pool cue, and, finally, a rifle that he has no skill in firing. His attempt to give the zombies ‘the slip’ only leads them back to his hideout, and he is unable to defend his mum or his friends. He tries his best with the resources he has at hand, but is unable, in his own words, to get a ‘fucking break’ the way typical film heroes do (164).

And it is Shaun's failure to fit the mold of the traditional American hyper-masculine hero that ultimately proves to help him discover alternative ways of dealing with the risks of connection.

The plot of *Shaun of the Dead* revolves around the misadventures of Shaun and his best friend, Ed (Nick Frost) as they attempt to flee to safety with Shaun's girlfriend and mother—again, heroic men charged with protecting passive women. Finally trapped in a pub and surrounded by zombies, Shaun's efforts ultimately fail. His mother is infected, and he is forced to shoot her. Shaun, Ed and Liz (Kate Ashfield) escape to momentary safety, only to discover that Ed has been bitten by a zombie and will soon turn. As the three contemplate suicide, Shaun relents and says, "You know, I don't think I've got it in me to shoot my flatmate, my mum, and my girlfriend all in the same night." And, rather than embracing violence as a last resort of security, Shaun submits to his fate. The comedy, of course, does not end on such a grim note. Instead, Shaun and Liz are unexpectedly rescued (by a female friend of Shaun's, no less, who has bravely contacted and assembled a rescue squad). In a denouement that seems to suggest everything has returned to normal, Shaun visits Ed, now entirely a zombie. However, Ed does not seem to mind his new state of being, since it finds him sitting on a sofa and playing videogames, much as he did before the end of the world. In the end, Shaun's choice to value connection despite its risks opens onto the unexpected—in the ruin of the old world, he finds a new way of living.<sup>36</sup>

In a similar way, the recent zombie-romance film *Warm Bodies* (based on the novel by Isaac Marion) plays on the valuation of connection over risk and not only parodies the genre of zombie film but also that of the teen romantic meet-cute (indeed, in the aesthetic of the film, the

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<sup>36</sup> The salvage punk conception of ruin on display at the end of *Shaun of the Dead* is a recurring theme in Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg's collaborations, including the recent film *The World's End* (2013).



future seems to be something a hipster wonderland for zombies and survivors alike). *Warm Bodies*, in many ways a cheeky zombie remake of *Romeo and Juliet*, follows the adventures of a young couple as they work to “exhume” the world after the zombie apocalypse. Julie (Teresa Palmer) and “R” (Nicholas Hoult) embody (literally) two opposing sides in the war for human survival. Julie is the daughter of Grigio (John Malkovich), the militant leader of the human survivors, all of whom live sheltered behind a colossal wall in the remains of Montreal. R, on the other hand, is a zombie. The film focuses on the value of human connection by taking literally the notion that it is connection to others that gives life. As Julie and R interact more and more, R’s zombie state fades and he returns to his human life. The same happens for the other zombies in the film, who must gradually learn, along with their human counterparts, how to forge new connections in the zombie apocalypse. The film ends with the demolition of the survivors’ wall, a telling ending that offers a response to the many zombie narratives that feature such boundaries being overrun. In the estimation of *Warm Bodies*, it is not security and defense that protect life. Rather, connection may be the only cure for an increasingly normal, zombie life.

The figure of the zombie has evolved over the years from a representative of an imperiled identity to one of an identity capable of discovering new ways of being in the world. Likewise, the traditional heroic figure has changed over time from a redemptive figure with the power to restore the political and social order to a figure with the courage to leave that order behind in search of something new. In this figure, a new valuation of community appears, one that privileges connection over safety. This same valuation of connection is related to dystopian fiction, which has long explored the detriment of a safe, orderly life, on an adventurous, meaningful sense of community.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “Because You are Different”: Dystopian Suffering and the Apocalyptic Body<sup>37</sup>

Near the end of Terry Gilliam’s *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), the film’s time-traveling, postapocalyptic protagonist, James Cole (Bruce Willis), sits in a darkened cinema, (re)watching Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). Realizing that he has seen the film some time before, Cole turns to Kathryn Raily (Madeleine Stowe), the woman who is quite literally the girl of his dreams, and says, “The movie never changes. It don’t change, but every time you see it, because you are different, you see different things.” This strange scene, set in intertextual relation to *Vertigo*, foregrounds the film’s investment in mapping the ways in which identity changes in the context of encountering difference. *Twelve Monkeys* demonstrates the capacity of the body to be invested symbolically and to make visible the complex interactions of power and ideology that both found and maintain identity, but it also insists that neither bodies nor the identities they make visible are ever entirely stable but rather abide in relationship to difference, to change and to history, even when—perhaps especially when—that history is marked by trauma. In a way that echoes *Vertigo*, *Twelve Monkeys* recognizes the (heroic male) body not only as a site symbolically invested with expectation and desire but also as a force that reveals the limits of static identity.<sup>38</sup>

*Twelve Monkeys* is also a film that demonstrates the deep generic connections between postapocalyptic science fiction and dystopian narrative, especially as both of these forms pay

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<sup>37</sup> An earlier version of this chapter appears in *Marxism and the Movies: Critical Essays on Class Struggle in the Cinema*. Ed. Mary K. Leigh and Kevin K. Durand. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> For extended readings of the significance of *Vertigo* in *Twelve Monkeys*, see Rascaroli; see also Fry and Craig.

close attention to the ways in which the body gets caught up in the pursuit of an idealized identity, both at the individual and the collective level. If *Twelve Monkeys* emerges from this tradition of apocalyptic narrative, it does so with a particularly postapocalyptic sensibility. In *Twelve Monkeys*, Gilliam ironically restages the heroic apocalyptic narrative, imagining the postapocalypse in such a way that it calls into question the common expectations of “millennial perfection” and stable identity often privileged in apocalyptic ideology (Quinby 2). In the place of renewal or liberation, *Twelve Monkeys* focuses on the disorientation, dispossession and confinement of its protagonist and his fellow survivors. Moreover, even as it relies on the conventions of action cinema, the film consistently focuses on Cole’s failure to be properly heroic, at least in the traditional sense. In the space created by this displacement, the film draws attention to the circularity and contradiction of apocalyptic thinking, instead recognizing the present moment as a site of struggle, hope and change—a moment historically linked to a traumatic past as well as a future that is anything but set in stone.

*Twelve Monkeys* self-consciously recycles the images and tropes of disaster cinema, as well as the science fiction conventions of time-travel fiction. The film follows Cole’s misadventures as he travels in time between a postapocalyptic future and the “present” world of the 1990s. In the future year of 2035—Cole’s present—an act of bioterrorism has released a virus that in turn has decimated the human population and driven the survivors underground to live in a dystopian, prison-like society, where they are governed by a mysterious group of scientists. The scientists act as trustees (or prison wardens) for the survivors, but they do so with predictable incompetence—much like the hyperbolized bureaucrats of Gilliam’s dystopian film *Brazil* (1985). The scientists send Cole back in time on a mission to collect evidence about the initial release of the virus, which they suspect happened in late 1996. Ostensibly, a pure sample

of the virus will allow scientists in the future to develop a vaccine and reclaim the surface of the planet. Nominally a detective story, *Twelve Monkeys* initially seems to recapitulate the teleological drive of apocalyptic fiction, to push the narrative toward a dramatic, redemptive and romanticized closure. However, against this expectation, the film instead becomes intensely circular, returning again and again to images of confinement, enclosure and limitation, even as the diegetic energy of the film continues to build to a climactic end.

In the service of such circularity, the repetitive dream sequence that repeatedly unfolds on screen—first as Cole’s recurring dream, then as the film’s ambiguous climax—functions as the leitmotif of *Twelve Monkeys*. In this sequence, which appears each time with minor variations, Cole dreams that he is a young boy, waiting with his parents in an airport terminal. As he watches, a man pushes past the security checkpoint, brandishing a gun at someone out of the frame. Alarms sound, guns fire, and the man falls. As he dies, a woman rushes to his side and cradles his head in her arms. This sequence is taken from Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1965), the photomontage/film upon which *Twelve Monkeys* is loosely based. In Marker’s film, humanity is forced to retreat underground in the wake of nuclear war. Out of options and nearly out of hope, authorities and scientists in the human underground begin to send travelers back in time in hopes of finding a way to improve their present situation (Del Rio 383). As in *Twelve Monkeys*, the scientists’ goal is not to change the past but to open new possibilities for their future.

*La Jetée* follows one such traveler as he returns to the past. He is chosen because he has particularly strong dreams about his childhood in the pre-holocaust world—dreams that recurrently coalesce around two images, one of a beautiful woman’s face, another of a man being shot and killed at an airport. As the traveler returns to the past, he encounters and falls into love with a woman who looks inexplicably familiar to him. Out of his desire to remain with her, he

refuses to obey the authorities that sent him back in time. The viewer recognizes this to be the exact woman from the traveler's dream, but the implications of this fact do not become apparent until the film's climax. As the traveler is meeting the woman at the airport, to escape with her, his dream (which is also his memory) becomes a reality: as he catches up to his own future, he suddenly sees the woman's face in tableau, exactly as it has always appeared to him in his dreams. In the midst of this recognition, the traveler is shot by another agent of the future and dies before he can escape.<sup>39</sup>

Just as in Marker's film, Cole's recurring dream is also a proleptic memory of his own death, a memory of watching himself die in Kathryn's arms. Thus, the dream sequence that grounds the action in *Twelve Monkeys* also repeatedly discloses the fact that Cole is rushing toward his own demise. Even as it distorts the traditional narrative conventions of apocalyptic fiction—especially the expectation of the hero's redemption—the dream sequence draws into sharp focus the limits of possibility in the film. Rather than focusing on liberation or redemption, the postapocalyptic sensibility at the core of *Twelve Monkeys* focuses on the suffering and ultimate failure of its protagonist. In this thematic shift, the film defamiliarizes the common expectations of the apocalyptic imagination and illustrates the importance of recognizing the limitations, contradictions and blockages of the present historical moment. Such recognition is vitally necessary, *Twelve Monkeys* seems to suggest, if there is ever to be a future worth living.

The film's engagement with the symbolic relationship between identity and the body takes on allegorical dimensions in the figure of Cole, the character who nominally occupies the position of heroic protagonist, even as he is continually foiled in his desire to be heroic. Throughout the course of the film, Cole is repeatedly subjected to bodily harm and psychological

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<sup>39</sup> For an in-depth comparison of Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* and Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, see Del Rio.

trauma—he becomes more a figuration of those who suffer in the service of the status quo than those who heroically preserve it. For instance, in one of the film’s key sequences, Cole is mistakenly sent back in time into the trenches of a heated WWI battle. He arrives naked and confused and is wounded before being suddenly plucked out of time again and relocated to the 1990s, an antique bullet still in his leg. In this moment, Cole literally carries the wounds of history within his body, under the skin and impossible to forget. His identity becomes as confused as his trips through time: he suffers doubt, disorientation and fear—at one point even celebrating the possibility of his insanity, since even that is preferable to his reality.

In its portrayal of Cole as a character vulnerable to the traumas of history, *Twelve Monkeys* is at odds with narratives that imagine disaster as a “secret salvation” (Bartter 148)—as a means of imaginatively negating the consequences of historical trauma (Berger xiv). For instance, as in Phillip Wegner’s insightful reading of the apocalyptic ending of *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), disaster often appears from the conservative perspective as an opportunity to recover an imperiled sense of identity and destiny, an opportunity inevitably imbricated in the allegorical function of the heroic protagonist.<sup>40</sup> Wegner writes, “It is precisely [John Connor’s] failure [to stop the apocalypse] that also turns out to be John’s personal triumph, allowing him to retrieve the heroic destiny that had been lost [and to] take up the mantle of leadership” (79-80). Without the disaster of Judgment Day—the artificial intelligence led

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<sup>40</sup> For a full discussion of the conservative political regeneration affected by the Bush administration and the American Right in the wake of 9/11—often conceived as an apocalyptic event—see Wegner’s *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties*.

apocalypse imagined in the *Terminator* franchise—John would be denied the very thing that has come to define his heroic identity: a kairotic experience of his own messianic destiny.<sup>41</sup>

The ambiguous mixture of suffering and salvation that gives life to the apocalyptic fiction of *T3* echoes what Gomel calls “the eroticism of disaster” (405). In its intense focus on the fate of its protagonist, *T3* overlooks the suffering of countless millions of people, foregrounding instead the role of a chosen few in the preservation of a properly heroic (and undeniably American) way of life. Indeed, in fictions that indulge such apocalyptic ideology, discourses of suffering, disaster and destiny become oddly eroticized. This tendency is clear in Stanley Kubrick’s satiric masterpiece, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). In the denouement of the film, once it is clear that global nuclear annihilation is inevitable, Dr. Strangelove (Peter Sellers) outlines a ludicrous plan for the continued survival of the (American) population. Surrounded by the president and his military advisors (tellingly all male, all white), the doctor begins to outline a plan for surviving nuclear fallout and gradually repopulating the country. He explains (in Sellers’ campy faux German accent):

Mr. President, I would not rule out the chance to preserve a nucleus of human specimens. It would be quite easy at the bottom of some of our deeper mineshafts. Radioactivity would never penetrate a mine some thousands of feet deep...of course it would be absolutely vital that our top government and military men be included, to foster and impart the required principles of leadership and tradition...actually, we would breed prodigiously...with the proper breeding techniques and a ratio of, say, ten females to each male, I would guess that they could then work their way back to the present Gross National Product within, say, twenty years.

As Dr. Strangelove describes this plan, the men listening to him become increasingly aroused by his ideas. Predictably, they link the urgency of repopulation to a renewal of Cold War competition with the Russians: survival and frenetic repopulation efforts become not only

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<sup>41</sup> See also Wegner’s excellent discussion of messianic destiny, conservative identity and apocalypse in the *Terminator* films, “I’ll Be Back: Repetitions and Revisions in the *Terminator* Films,” in *Life Between Two Deaths*.

human, but also patriotic duties. The catastrophe of nuclear war, in this instance, mysteriously reinvigorates the patriarchal and militant identity of the status quo. As if to drive this point home, Dr. Strangelove miraculously springs from his wheelchair (Mein Führer, I can walk!), literally erect at the libidinal possibilities suddenly facing him.

Dr. Strangelove's plan, as with many other such narratives, tellingly downplays the role of suffering in fantasies of apocalyptic regeneration. In *Twelve Monkeys*, on the other hand, it is precisely suffering that comes to be the film's postapocalyptic motif. In the film, the apocalypse is imagined from the perspective of the dispossessed of apocalypse, those excluded from redemption or "utopia"—those who, like Cole, are left to suffer for the benefit of the status quo. This inversion of perspective defamiliarizes the heroic role of the apocalyptic protagonist and opens a space for the viewer—still drawn to identify with Cole—to recognize and reconsider the ways in which apocalyptic thinking influences cultural attitudes toward suffering, violence and historical trauma (Quinby 2; Bartter 148). In *Twelve Monkeys*, the continued dominance of the status quo loses its utopian luster and becomes instead an openly dystopian possibility. As Tom Moylan argues, "Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century...[terrors like] exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease...and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life" (xi)

In this way, *Twelve Monkeys* recalls the treatment of the status quo present in Matheson's fiction, as well as Romero's cinema. To this end, *Twelve Monkeys* is a narrative about the ways in which the status quo—along with its prevailing ideologies—is diffused with discipline, control and violence. Rather than being reinvigorated in the wake of the disaster wrought by the virus, human society becomes increasingly inhospitable to everyone except those with power; identity becomes more constrained and controlled; freedom becomes inaccessible. Against the



grain of apocalyptic narratives that privilege visions of stalwart and savvy heroic protagonists, *Twelve Monkeys* paints Cole as a character destined to fail—not because he is intrinsically flawed, but because he is trapped by the powers that control, order, limit and punish him. The film establishes such a presentation of Cole through a series of revisions that undermine the conventions of apocalyptic narrative.

As many critics have pointed out, the basic premise of *Twelve Monkeys* resembles the postapocalyptic, “time-loop” scenarios of other popular science fictions films, most notably the *Terminator* films. Indeed, given that *Twelve Monkeys* was produced only a few years after the box-office smash *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), such comparisons are both apt and inevitable. Certainly this scenario has a diegetic complexity that lends a film a sense of urgency and makes it particularly engaging for viewers. Berger explains, “The ‘time-loop’ ... is a perfect apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic plot line. Every action before the apocalypse is simultaneously an action after the apocalypse, and the event itself exists as a monstrous possibility made more or less likely by actions that, if it occurs, will never happen” (6). In other words, such puzzle-box narratives have at their core fundamental questions about human agency, as well as about the relationship between action and reaction.<sup>42</sup> In such scenarios, the conventional expectation is that the heroic protagonist will avert disaster and save the day. However, Gilliam’s reiteration of this postapocalyptic, time-loop narrative echoes Cole’s insight that “every time you see [something], because you are different, you see different things.” Even as Cole moves through the motions of the heroic protagonist, it becomes increasingly obvious that he is a different kind of protagonist, more anti-hero than hero. He is more everyman than messiah.

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<sup>42</sup> See, for contemporary examples: Duncan Jones’ *Source Code* (2011) and Rian Johnson’s *Looper* (2012).

In *T2*, Wegner points out, the impossibility of imagining the end of a late-capitalist status quo comes to be represented as a figuration of its immortality, its “[ability] to reproduce itself into infinity” (74). Indeed, in *T2*, Sarah and John Connor succeed not only in delivering their world from disaster—or, it might be better to say *through* disaster—but also in sustaining the dominant order of that world. As in the much-discussed alternate ending of *T2*, Sarah and John continue their battle by becoming a grandmother and a senator, respectively. In *Twelve Monkeys*, the dominant late-capitalist status quo is equally immortal, self-sustaining and painfully continuous; however, in Gilliam’s film, the imaginative limitation of the characters, along with their disorientation and inability to recognize either their own limits or their opportunities for freedom, becomes a figure of the totalizing—and totalitarian—capacity of the system itself. Thus, while *Twelve Monkeys* repeats, in key ways, the narrative structure of *T2*, in this repetition, the narrative changes and takes on new meaning. Whereas *T2* envisions late capitalist culture as positive and progressive, *Twelve Monkeys* renders it much more darkly—as if to suggest the indefinite continuation of the dominant order is more dystopian than desirable. In this light, it becomes significant that the time-loop at the center of *Twelve Monkeys* continuously foregrounds failure—James Cole is no John Connor. He has no messianic destiny, no redemptive future.

Likewise, the closed loop of the narrative echoes elsewhere in *Twelve Monkeys*: the film makes it clear that Cole cannot save the (already-doomed) past. When the scientists in Cole’s postapocalyptic world first return him to the past to collect information about the virus, they mistakenly send him to the wrong time. In short order, Cole finds himself locked in a mental ward, being questioned by a panel of psychiatrists (a group that offers one of many parallels in the film between the present and the future). Asked to tell his story, Cole says to them—notably using the past tense—“Five billion people died in 1996 and 1997. Almost the entire population

of the world.” To this, one doctor replies, “Are you going to save us, Mr. Cole?” Cole’s response illustrates the entire film’s approach to apocalyptic redemption: “How can I save you? This already happened. I can’t save you. No one can.” In this exchange, the film forecloses the possibility of redemption, the possibility of undoing historical change or trauma. This, taken together with the film’s continual return to the image of Cole’s death and the moment of his failure, mark a shift in the film away from liberation and toward limitation. If, as in many apocalyptic stories, the viewer is meant to identify with the survival and redemption of the protagonist, Cole’s lack of power and, ultimately, his death provide the viewer with an altogether different experience—the experience of defeat. It is against this estranging turnabout that the rest of the film plays out.

In the place of an attention to future liberation or redemption, *Twelve Monkeys* examines the dynamics of power that govern and control the present. Thus, *Twelve Monkeys*’ version of the postapocalyptic time-loop is drastically different from the version depicted in the *Terminator* films, which repeatedly invokes Sarah Connor’s apocalyptic motto: “No fate but what we make.” Significantly, in *Twelve Monkeys*, individuals alone do not make change possible; rather, possibilities for change are constrained by structural and institutional power relationships that govern and enclose the social and political situation. The film seems to bear this out: despite Cole’s best intentions to stop the apocalypse and to free himself or form a relationship to Kathryn, he is prevented by forces beyond his control—indeed, beyond his recognition.

Elena Del Rio argues that *Twelve Monkeys*’ “strong degree of closure erases the most disturbing aspects of its own circular time frame” (383). On the contrary, it is this very emphasis on narrative closure that drives the film’s examination of social and political limitation. Furthermore, these limitations manifest in the film’s peculiar attention to the control exercised

over Cole's body. In both the future world of 2035 and in the "present" world of the 1990s, Cole's body is enclosed, locked away and meticulously monitored. Again, representations of Cole's suffering become a particular way of allegorizing his—and, by extension the audience's—present situation.

In *Twelve Monkeys*, the representation of bodies is heavily implicated in the film's attention to the dialectic of freedom and control. Thus, it is not only the needs of the body—in particular its need to avoid exposure to the apocalyptic virus—that come to the foreground in *Twelve Monkeys* but also the problem that the body often poses for those in power. In a sense, Cole's body becomes a map for the knowledge and power relationships imagined in the film: the film repeatedly looks at Cole's body in order to demonstrate his lack of power, freedom or choice. Ironically, even this act of looking is also a repetition, another layer of intertextuality against which the film's strategy of revising the apocalyptic story plays out. The repeated images of Cole's restrained, defeated and dying body are at odds with conventional depictions of the heroic protagonist. Indeed, this contradiction is especially evident given the fact that the body of James Cole is also the body of Bruce Willis, whose particular status as an action hero adds a level of dissonance to his portrayal of Cole.

*Twelve Monkeys'* initial release followed by mere months Willis' appearance in *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* (1995). In this third installment in the *Die Hard* franchise (which began with *Die Hard* [1988] and continued with *Die Hard 2* [1990]), Willis returns as officer John McClane, an unflappably tough cop with an uncanny knack for fighting his way out of impossible situations. In many ways, McClane embodies the spirit of American exceptionalism and savoir-faire. In *Die Hard*, McClane finds himself outnumbered and outgunned by a group of German terrorists (led with immaculate poise and calculation by Hans Gruber [Alan Rickman]).

*Die Hard* is very much a story of its historical moment, hardly out of place among mainstream action films of the late 1980s. What is particularly interesting in *Die Hard*, however, is the careful attention paid in the film to McClane's body. In one scene, McClane—who is caught with his pants down (or at least his shirt and shoes off) when Gruber's men storm the high-rise office building he is in—is forced to run across broken glass to escape Gruber's henchmen. Later, he stands in front of a public bathroom sink gingerly picking shards of glass from his bloodied feet. At the film's conclusion, after being repeatedly beaten, shot at and otherwise physically punished, McClane limps into the office where Gruber is waiting and defiantly shoots the man in the head. This last act of violence vindicates the beating that McClane has suffered, and the allegorical message of McClane's broken but unstoppable body seems bloody obvious: no matter the odds, the (American) good guy does it all—saves the day and gets the girl.

Likewise, the representations of the body of Bruce Willis/James Cole in *Twelve Monkeys* vibrate with symbolic meaning, but that meaning is quite the opposite from *Die Hard*. Cole is as physically imposing as McClane, yet his physicality takes on a different symbolic valence.<sup>43</sup> During his interview with the panel of psychiatrists in 1990, Cole raises his voice at an orderly who is easily larger and stronger than he. Still, the orderly recoils, as if instinctively afraid of Cole. Later in the film, when an assailant threatens Kathryn, Cole brutally beats the man to death with the same violent capacity with which McClane might dispose of a generic baddie. This violence, however, is not depicted as the act of a hero but rather as that of a desperate man. Despite his physicality, Cole repeatedly appears on screen in positions of submission and

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<sup>43</sup> Before *Twelve Monkeys*, Willis had played vulnerable figures, such as his turn as Butch in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Here, however, although Butch is at times vulnerable, he is able to repeatedly reassert his own strength over other men through violence. In the end, Butch rides off (into the sunset) on a motorcycle (it's a chopper) taken from a man he has killed.

containment. Thus, instead of becoming the embodiment of survival or redemption like Connor or McClane, Cole becomes a figure of limitation, even incarceration.

In the postapocalyptic future, Cole lives as a prisoner. When he first appears, he is inside his cell, wrapped in the plastic materials of his sleeping hammock. The mise-en-scene of this early sequence is emblematic of the rest of the film: Cole is suspended in space, held tightly and symbolically neither here nor there. Beyond him, the walls of his cell resemble an animal's cage, claustrophobic and framed by wire mesh. Farther into the background, rows upon rows of this same cell repeat, and inside each, the bodies of prisoners hang, fidget and scream. Above the cages, guards patrol endlessly. As D. Brent Laytham points out, "The movie is replete with barriers: cages, bars, fences, manacles, biohazard suits, straightjackets, plastic rain coats, locked doors...[and] human contact is seldom direct" (79). Moreover, the constant foregrounding of such visual barriers in *Twelve Monkeys* emphasizes the film's interest in making visible the efforts spent to control the bodies of those without power, people like Cole.

Indeed, Cole's lack of political power is made manifest by his concordant lack of control over his own body—and this lack is intensified, given the ways in which it contradicts common expectations of the male body. This disenfranchisement becomes obvious early in the film, when the scientists select Cole to participate in an experiment. A guard shouts down to Cole, "Volunteer duty!" Cole responds somewhat defiantly, "I didn't volunteer." When the guard grumbles something about Cole causing trouble, Cole's voice softens and he says quietly, "No trouble." Soon after, a crane arm descends and lifts Cole out of his prison cell—the visual analog of a scientist reaching into a cage to pick out a lab rat. The scientists control not only Cole's body, but also his voice, his ability to speak, to protest or to refuse commands.

In his first turn of “volunteer duty,” the scientists send Cole to the planet’s inhospitable surface to collect various specimens for study. In order to leave the underground city, Cole must first don several layers of protective clothing and, finally a biohazard suit. These layers begin immediately against Cole’s skin: he wears, for instance, rubber leggings and a skullcap. Atop these, he puts a large, cumbersome, plastic suit. As he dresses, a recorded voice relays a warning: “These are the instructions for the first time probe. Listen carefully. They must be followed exactly. All openings of your garment must be sealed completely. If the integrity of the suit is compromised in any way, if the fabric is torn or a zipper not closed, readmittance will be denied.”

In many ways, the biohazard suit is a symbol of the scientists’ control over Cole. Even as he leaves the hermetically sealed underground in which he lives, that world goes with him, contains him and prevents him from truly going outside its reach. The world outside the prison, outside the suit, is utterly alien to Cole, and it is open in a way that Cole’s world will never be. The suit is a reminder that Cole cannot belong to both worlds at once: even touching the world of the surface, even breathing its air, would irreparably rupture his relationship to the sealed off world to which he quite literally belongs. Furthermore, even as the suit is an emblem of the protection offered by the world of the scientists, its meaning evolves as the film goes on. It is not the world of the surface that Cole cannot touch—the world that ostensibly belongs to the virus—but it is also any possible way of being in the world that falls outside the regulation and control of the scientists themselves. Thus, Cole’s appearance within the biohazard suit speaks to his oppressively tenuous relationship with the power of the scientists, a relationship that thrives on obedience and brutally punishes defiance.

When Cole returns from the surface—biohazard suit intact—he is reminded of his place in yet another way. After he disrobes, a group of guards roughly scrub Cole’s naked body—each guard wearing a biohazard suit of his own. The guards perform their duty with a violent touch; they spray a restrained Cole with water and scour him with long-handled brushes as if to physically remind him of the power they exert over him. A subsequent scene shows Cole sitting in isolation, drawing his own blood with a syringe. Taken together, these scenes emphasize the scientists’ attitude toward Cole. He cannot bring any trace of the outside world into the underground—his body, skin and blood must submit to this truth. In this way, the surface and the virus come to mean something other than death and fear—they hint at the existence of imaginative possibilities outside the immunitary protection of the well-ordered world.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault outlines a relationship between plague and discipline that articulates the interplay between power, control and identity—a relationship that echoes in *Twelve Monkeys*. Foucault writes:

The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him (197).

The power of the scientists over Cole’s body is a power to order the world, and the body, as they see fit. It is a power that is ultimately biopolitical in its inception and driven toward immunity in its practice. The virus against which the scientists ostensibly defend the survivors is, on another symbolic level, also the presence of difference that threatens their grasp on power and on control.



If the world of 2035 is, in this way, openly dystopian,<sup>44</sup> the world of the 1990s is disquietingly similar. Del Rio suggests, “*Twelve Monkeys* adopts a homogenous visual style that levels out the differences between past, present and future by saturating all of the times/worlds with the same 1990s-vintage gloss and dystopian dreariness” (391). Indeed, the film stages a repetition of Cole’s prison cell and biohazard suit when he first arrives in the 90s. When Cole first appears on screen in the “present,” he is squatting in a police station holding cell, waiting for psychiatric evaluation. In the cell, Cole is wearing only a woman’s raincoat, made of a plastic material that conspicuously recalls the biohazard suit of 2035. Likewise, when Cole is remanded to a mental hospital, the hospital’s orderlies bathe and inspect him in a repetition of the earlier scene. In these repetitions, images of containment take on the same symbolic meaning: the body must be controlled, regulated and separated from the outside world; it must be submissive, disciplined and willing. In drawing this parallel between the postapocalyptic future and the present of the viewer, *Twelve Monkeys* begins to suggest that the same inimical forces that torturously govern Cole’s world also already hold power in the present.

Importantly, however, it is not only through examples of physical control that *Twelve Monkeys* illustrates an attention to the relationship between power and the body. Rather, it is also through the representation of what Del Rio calls “absolute visibility” (383) that the film demonstrates the power of the dominant order to regulate and contain those within its totalizing gaze. In a way that recalls Foucault’s discussion of the relationship between surveillance and control (“The entire [prison] institution...culminates in the cell, on the walls of which are written

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<sup>44</sup> The paradigmatic examples of dystopian literature in this regard are Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* and George Orwell’s *1984*. In each of these texts, state power is fundamentally imbricated in repressive control of the bodies living in the state so that recontaining rebellious citizens happens finally with acts of violence to their bodies.

in black letters: ‘God sees you’”) the scientists of 2035 exercise control through both observation and conspicuous visibility (294). In the film, this power is symbolized by the scientists’ giant videoglobe—a salvagepunk-styled orb of monitors that hovers in the middle distance between Cole and the scientists whenever Cole is called up for interrogation. The videoglobe shows Cole whatever the scientists wish him to see—often just the faces and places of relevance to his investigation of the virus. However, the monitors also display magnified images of the scientists themselves—images that conspicuously *show* Cole he is being watched. Del Rio writes:

Besides reminding Cole, in a self-reflexive way, of its own global supervising capacities through the tautological display of a series of disembodied eyes, the gyrating eye also features images of people or objects that act as clues in the investigative mission engaging Cole. By holding in a simultaneous, multiple image events that belong to different spatiotemporal contexts, the rotating eye collapses the irreducible difference of these events under its commanding gaze (391).

By watching Cole, and by reminding him that he is being watched, the scientists exercise a thoroughgoing power over Cole’s body, leaving him nowhere in space or time to escape their control.

The film’s emphasis on visibility takes a different form in the present setting. Here, as in the cages of the future world, the psychiatric ward to which Cole is committed features many nurses and orderlies who continuously monitor Cole and his fellow inmates. In a different way, however, these inmates are constrained by their own visual consumption of the status quo and its conspicuous visibility on the television. Jeffrey Goines (Brad Pitt), Cole’s appointed tour guide in the mental ward and the future leader of the Army of the Twelve Monkeys, explicitly ties the television to the preservation of the status quo. He tells Cole, with all the gusto of a conspiracy nut:

It’s all right there—all right there. Look. Listen. Kneel. Pray. Commercials! We’re not productive anymore. No one needs to make things anymore. It’s all automated. What are we for, then? We’re consumers. Yeah, okay, okay—buy a lot of stuff, you’re a

good citizen. But if you don't buy a lot of stuff, if you don't—fact, Jim, fact!—what are you then I ask you? You're mentally ill!<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the mental ward patients seem to constantly watch television, and the programs they daily watch become for them a continual reminder of their incarcerated status, as well as their own non-normativity. As Carrol Fry and J. Robert Craig note, advertisements for the Florida Keys continuously play in the background of the mental ward, and these advertisements offer foreshadowing for Cole's plan to escape with Kathryn to Key West at the end of the film (6). These commercials figure in another important way as well: the Keys become a symbol to the inmates of a place outside the woes of their present situation. At the same time, however, these advertisements remind the ward's patients of all that might be theirs if they could only adhere to the rule of the normal. Thus, the glossy images of the Keys take on a hollow utopian promise of escape; however, like the constant whisperings about parole and pardon among the prisoners in 2035, this promise seems all too good to be true.

Finally, Cole's interactions with the scientists themselves illustrate a parallel between the postapocalyptic future and the present. In each space, Cole appears on screen in positions of disempowerment and restraint. In 2035, when he speaks with the scientists, Cole sits in a chair that restrains him and lifts him off the floor, so that he is suspended halfway between the floor and ceiling. In the 1990s, he sits in front of the panel, flanked by orderlies who watch his every move suspiciously. The power the scientists have over Cole in these moments is both physical and ideological—they have the authority to name him either criminal or insane. As Elizabeth Rosen puts it, "It is these scientific figures who render judgment in both the present-day and

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<sup>45</sup> In the spirit of intertextuality, it is amusing to mark the ways in which Brad Pitt's performance as Jeffrey Goines resurfaces in his portrayal of the strident anti-capitalist Tyler Durden in David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999).

future worlds. They are empowered to decide who is incarcerated and who is pardoned or let free. In the future, they can send people on missions and arbitrarily yank them home” (87). And indeed, this is exactly what the scientists do to Cole. He is their pawn—or perhaps their lab rat—to be used and disposed of as they see fit. Even Kathryn, herself a psychiatrist, says of her profession: “We decide what’s right and wrong. We decide who’s crazy or not.” Thus, as the film’s repeated *mise-en-scène* seems to make clear, the scientists in both the 90s and the postapocalyptic future serve to ground the dystopian aspects of both worlds—they are the law-givers and judges, the bearers of power and the dominant, normative identity. As Foucault puts it, “Against the plague, which is a mixture, discipline brings into play its power, which is one of analysis” (197). By scrupulously suppressing difference, the scientists maintain an idealized, immunized collective identity—one that produces no small amount of suffering in the dispossessed.

Moreover, *Twelve Monkeys* suggests that the scientists are interested in little more than the preservation of their own power and dominance. If the scientists of the 90s are powerful and obscure figures, in the wake of apocalypse, they only grow stronger, their control more fully realized. Indeed, although the scientists of the future espouse the noble goal of reclaiming the planet for humanity, their real motivation is unavailable in the film. They promise a pardon to Cole for his role in finding the source of the virus, but this promise turns out to be empty—pardoned or not, Cole still cannot choose his way in the world. His pardon does nothing to change his relationship to power. Indeed, when he attempts to disobey, to stay in the 1990s in order to be with Kathryn, the scientists respond by sending agents to the past with orders to kill her if Cole does not again obey. In what is as close to a moment of epiphany and recognition that the film offers, Cole finally understands the scientists’ motives in threatening to kill Kathryn:

“This part isn’t about the virus at all, is it? It’s about following orders, about doing what you’re told.”

Indeed, given the film’s careful attention to the dystopian aspects of the future community, it seems clear that Cole’s scientists are not interested in orchestrating redemption. Rather they are invested in their own power, in insuring its continuance. In this regard, the virus itself may well be another kind of insurance, a source of power that guarantees their continued dominance. Rosen argues:

The scientists themselves are morally ambiguous characters, responsible for the humanly engineered virus which decimated the human population and the future cure which will allow humans to return to the earth’s surface. The scientists, in their present and future incarnations, are depicted simultaneously as noble figures whose acts of creation can ‘redeem’ the human race, and as creepy, sly, secretive figures whose agendas are unfathomable and who are responsible for getting the human race in trouble in the first place (87).

This ambiguity, together with their disregard for human dignity, solidifies the scientists as the self-invested rulers of a dark future.

Recognizing the scientists in this way adds ominous meaning to the penultimate scene of *Twelve Monkeys*, one that plays out after Cole’s death and the initial release of the virus. Fleeing the terminal where Cole has tried to kill him, the man responsible for releasing the virus (importantly, a scientist) boards a plane, carrying with him the very thing Cole has been searching through time for, an original sample of the virus. As the man takes his seat, a woman off camera begins to speak: “It’s obscene. All the violence. All the lunacy. Shootings even at airports now. You might say that *we’re* the next endangered species. Human beings.” To this, the man smiles and replies, “I think you’re right, ma’am. I think you’ve hit the nail on the head.” As the camera pans over, the woman speaking comes into the frame—she is none other than a scientist from the future. Turning to the man now seated next to her, she reaches to shake his

hand and says simply, “Jones is my name. I’m in insurance.” By this point in the film, however, it seems obvious what exactly it is that Jones is there to ensure: the continuation of her power to decide the course of the future. Retrieving the pure virus becomes yet another way of controlling the presence of difference and change in her world.

It has been suggested that *Twelve Monkeys* is a film that shows a world without hope (Laytham 79). Indeed, the apocalyptic narrative at the heart of the film focuses on a protagonist who seems hopelessly trapped, unable to be free, unable to even have control over his own body. Additionally, the film systematically undermines the liberty, redemption and hope that Cole relentlessly pursues. And, finally, the film goes so far as to show viewers the quiet end of the world, the moment when the virus is released into the air. The film’s vision is certainly bleak.

However, *Twelve Monkeys* is not a narrative about the failure of hope. It is, instead, about the *limits* of hope, about the larger social and political forces that create and enforce those limits. The film’s (re)vision of apocalypse is one that refuses to see change as something that belongs to the future, to a world beyond the end of this one. Instead, in its continuous reiteration of Cole’s disorientation, limitation and suffering, the film invites its audience to recognize the totality within which Cole—and the audience—is bound. In its unrelenting attention to the limits of change, *Twelve Monkeys* preserves the true value of apocalypse—its capacity for revelation (Berger 5).

The revelation at the heart of *Twelve Monkeys* is not that the present situation is hopeless. Rather, what the film recognizes is that any hope for change must be grounded first of all in the recognition of the limitations of the present situation, of those structures and powers that make change seem all but impossible. As Fredric Jameson puts it, change begins with “a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right. This is very far from a liberal capitulation to

the necessity of capitalism, however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived”

(*Archaeologies* 232-233). Indeed, it is in its recognition of the limitations and contradictions of the present that the quiet hope of *Twelve Monkeys* shines through.

Near the film’s ending, once Cole has died, Kathryn—knowing that the young James Cole is somewhere in the crowd—looks frantically about for him. The camera lingers on her face as she finds him and looks tenderly at him. After a breath, she smiles ever so slightly, as if oddly contented about something. Subsequently, *Twelve Monkeys* ends with the young Cole walking out of the airport and returning to his family’s car. The camera moves steadily in, until it shows only Cole’s blue eyes—the same shot that opened the film. In this final repetition, the estranging strategy of *Twelve Monkeys* comes full circle: Cole has been killed, but he is not dead. He failed, but he gets to try again. Like Kathryn’s smile—the hint of something dynamically new—this ending reminds us, the rules don’t change, but we do.

## CONCLUSION

“The world wasn’t ending: it had ended and now they were in a new place. They did not recognize it because they had never seen it before.”

--Colson Whitehead, *Zone One*

### The Truth(s) of the Other: Escaping the Boundaries of the Same in Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9*

In the end, postapocalyptic science fiction after 9/11 speaks to a desire to imagine alternate endings for the narrative of defense and security that has governed the American political, cultural and social status quo in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the figure of the masculine hero, many of the works discussed above deconstruct traditional understandings of the intertwined concepts of identity and community, concepts which have been so central to America’s understanding of its place on the global stage, at least since the long 1950s (but really long before then). In place of an apocalyptically imagined hero—one who claims the side of right and the power of legitimate violence—these postapocalyptic narratives tell the stories of men who value connection above security, even if that connection means letting go of a particular kind of identity, even if it means suffering. In this way, many of these characters reveal a perspective on identity that understands the necessity of change, and, concordantly, these characters speak to a vision of community as a moment of connection between identity and difference. Finally then, these alternative heroes offer images of a new kind of truth about the complex and contradictory relationship between identity and community—a truth akin to what Hardt and Negri call love, “conceived politically” (356).



Such a truth, one based on connection rather than defense, offers a means of understanding the limits of the apocalyptic imagination. Alain Badiou writes, “[T]ruth [can be conceived] in relation to something quite precise: what kind of world does one see when one experiences it from the point of view of two and not one? What is the world like when it is experienced, developed and lived from the point of view of difference and not identity?” (22). Many of the postapocalyptic protagonists discussed above are examples of souls in search of a life that exceeds the boundaries of the status quo, a life that is determined not by a defense of the self against contagion or difference but rather is defined by the pursuit of meaningful connection(s) with others. In many ways, the alternative heroes imagined in many postapocalyptic stories resonate with the belief that “Another world is possible,” a world beyond the measured and the known (Hardt and Negri 354). In their refusal to return to normal, these men and their fellow travelers discover a way of life governed by risk and connection, rather than security and stability.

Such discoveries are often fleeting, often intensely painful, but they offer audiences the chance to imagine such discoveries for themselves. Indeed, the images of community available in postapocalyptic fiction—and in related zombie and dystopian narratives—are anything but clear, practical or immediately realizable. They are, however, images that disclose a desire for new possibilities for identity and community alike. This is the (utopian) hope hidden in all the images of ruin and disaster that fill postapocalyptic science fiction.

In the context of postapocalyptic science fiction, the transit from security and stability to risk and connection often appears alongside a good deal of suffering for the heroic protagonist. As in Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*, letting go of the known world is an intensely painful process, one that demands an utter rethinking of one’s place in the world. In the end, however,

such a process often opens onto a moment of possibility previously unimagined. This is, after all, the last image audiences get in Romero's *Day of the Dead* and such campy films as *Shaun of the Dead* or *Warm Bodies*. In Matheson's novel, Neville's final realization is certainly conflicted—he recognizes the terror and pain he has caused others—but it is also, for him, a realization that his end is not *the* end, not the utter collapse of community he had feared it to be. Unlike the hyper-masculine protagonists of many American action films, who suffer and are impervious to change, postapocalyptic protagonists like Neville suffer and, having suffered, emerge into a new world. Though such transformations are rarely the religious salvation imagined in the Revelation of St. John, they are, nevertheless, redemptive and freeing.

Though my focus in this study has been almost entirely on American postapocalyptic narratives, I want to conclude by turning to South African director Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009), a film that takes seriously the notion that risk and connection are more valuable than security and stability. In its reworking of the first-contact science fiction motif, *District 9* offers one of the clearest examples in recent popular culture of the relationship between the body, masculine identity and community. And, within this perspective, the film focuses on a protagonist who desires nothing more than to be absolutely normal, and who, in his failure to be normal, discovers a perspective on community that allows him to understand, for the first time, his relationship to others—and to discover possibilities for life outside the boundaries of the status quo.

Critics have both appreciated and critiqued Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) as a political allegory, paying special attention to the film's treatment of South African apartheid as well as its reworking of various post-colonial themes.<sup>46</sup> However, as Matthew Jones points out, there is

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<sup>46</sup> For more, see Moses, Michael and Lucy Valerie Graham, et al.

ample reason to treat Blomkamp's debut as much more than a commentary on apartheid:

“Coming to the screen entrenched in a strong sense of man's inhumanity to man, *District 9* is not satisfied with its allusions to apartheid but instead looks much deeper into the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> [and 21<sup>st</sup>] century and connects the dots between all the human cruelty it finds” (121). Indeed, the film operates in the tradition of postapocalyptic and dystopian fiction, paying careful attention as it does to the regulation of the social environment under the watchful eye of an oppressive governing power—in the case of the film, the international corporation Multinational United (MNU). *District 9* explores the ways in which the relentless pursuit of the status quo produces a suffering that manifests upon the body and extends to the community, and, by tracing the failure of one man to maintain his idealized identity, the film celebrates the idea that identity and difference can have a reciprocal rather than divisive relationship.

The opening and closing shots of *District 9* initiate and recapitulate the film's ongoing attention to the male body as a site of both control and resistance. The film opens in the style of a documentary interview—a grainy picture shows a man sitting at a desk, fumbling noisily with a microphone and hamming awkwardly for the camera. He speaks nervously, his blue eyes darting around for the proper place to focus his gaze. He wears a neatly trimmed mustache and a bad haircut. This is Wikus Van De Merwe (Sharlto Copley), the film's protagonist. Alternately, the closing shot of the film shows an alien, one of the film's extraterrestrial refugees, or “prawns,” as they are pejoratively called, squatting in a garbage heap, carefully crafting a flower out of scrap metal. The alien is covered in tattered cloth, the remnants of old human clothing; tentacles and claws protrude from its body and squirm and gyrate, seemingly on their own. Though the alien certainly does not look like the man from the beginning of the film, this too is Wikus,

transformed from human to “prawn” after being exposed to an alien biochemical technology that has rewritten his genetic coding.

*District 9* is replete with “shots of bodies in pain, alien bodies, dead bodies, exploding bodies, body fluids, and meat” (Helgesson 173), but the film’s attention to the corporeal body is localized in the suffering body of Wikus Van De Merwe. It is between the poles of his two bodies—human male and alien—that the film’s critical attention to social control and resistance unfolds. As the protagonist transforms, in both the biological and ideological senses of the word, his body becomes central to the film’s invocation of the discourses of identity and difference. In *District 9*, the protagonist’s body is plumbed as a site of the complex interaction of power(s), a locus both for external ideological control and for self-government. It is also, importantly, a source of resistance and of potential liberation. As Naomi Jacobs parses the site of the body: “The body itself must be the locus of utopian or dystopian transformation, whether that transformation is to be brought about by liberating the body or by more effectively subduing it” (3). *District 9* literalizes this process of transformation in Wikus’ liminal status as neither fully human nor fully alien.

The dystopian world that Wikus inhabits differs from traditional dystopian texts, though it shares many similarities. Much like Kazuo Ishiguro’s alternate history dystopian novel, *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *District 9* differs from traditional dystopian texts in that it does not imagine a distant future but rather an alternate past in which a significantly different historical development has yielded a very different present. In the alternate history that Blomkamp presents, an alien spaceship mysteriously grinds to a halt above the city of Johannesburg and hovers motionlessly there. Unlike Klaatu (Michael Rennie) in Robert Wise’s *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), no ambassador emerges from the immobilized ship; rather, the ship remains undisturbed until

government forces decide to cut into the ship. Inside the ship, these forces find a large group of alien refugees on the verge of physical collapse and in social disarray. The humans commence a rescue plan and place the aliens in a camp directly below the ship, a camp that quickly becomes a slum—District 9, home to abject poverty and both alien and human violence.

Interestingly, Blomkamp's version of first contact subverts many of SF's standard tropes by imagining an alien population that neither seeks to redeem nor to colonize/exterminate humanity. Instead, Blomkamp's aliens seem to be—with several notable exceptions—mostly passive toward human civilization. As Lucy Valerie Graham points out, the aliens' closest analog is the role of a guest. In the context of the film, this narrative choice serves to focus the film's critical attention onto the humans who work to host (and exploit) the aliens, rather than on the radical difference of the aliens. Graham writes, "[The aliens] seem to want to perform the role of guests... They are allowed to exist, but the hospitality offered to them is conditional on their obedience to segregationist laws, and eventually on their removal from the urban space to a relocation camp" (163). Concordantly, the critical tension in the film does not revolve around the aliens' intentions toward the humans, but rather the other way around. It is the human effort to segregate and control the alien population that contributes to *District 9*'s dystopian atmosphere.

The sense of crisis that accompanies the arrival of the aliens serves to legitimize MNU's power to enforce strict social boundaries in the city. As Sarah Livingstone (Nathalie Boltz), one of the film's many fictional, documentary-style commentators explains, "We didn't have a plan. There was a million of [the aliens]. So, what was a temporary holding zone soon became fenced, became militarized. And before we knew it, it was a slum." The sense that the aliens living in District 9 have indefinitely become an interruption in the normal fabric of the city's (human) life

pervades in the film. One interviewee tells the documentary cameras, “If they were from another country we might understand, but they are not even from this planet at all.” MNU, rather than working to empower the aliens to return to health and prosperity (or even simply to their ship), it works to keep the aliens earthbound. Indeed, MNU’s key strategy is to divide the human and alien population, both spatially and ideologically.

Blomkamp foregrounds the importance of the body in MNU’s policy of segregation in a number of ways. Notable among these is the presence of declamatory signs (familiar to viewers from the film’s viral marketing campaign) in the streets of Johannesburg that mimic the (ostensibly) universally recognizable symbols that generally adorn the entrances to public restrooms. However, instead of demarking spaces along gendered lines, the public signs in and around District 9 feature a two-dimensional drawing of a non-human figure and carry slogans such as “For Human Use Only/ Non-Humans Banned!” or “For Humans Only/ Report Non-Human Use.” Like any historical segregationist rhetoric, the public notices which the camera repeatedly returns to in *District 9* invoke a boundary based in the physical body. The two-dimensional drawings of “prawns” serve to efface any difference in language or politics and instead privilege the singular difference of the body.

Interestingly enough, the slogans on these public notices also reveal the dual function of MNU’s policies of segregation. In addition to “warning” away non-humans from “For Humans Only” public spaces, the signs imbricate the city’s human residents in the policing of non-humans and, by extension, in the policing of themselves. Indeed, the power exerted by MNU to regulate the aliens and separate them from humans also serves indirectly to regulate the humans under MNU’s control. In other words, the attention given to the aliens as Other-than-human—indeed the aliens are consistently referred to by media simply as “non-humans”—creates a

binary distinction that informs the ideology of the human population of Johannesburg perhaps more so than the alien population. By establishing the aliens as Other, MNU creates a space for its own exercise of power,<sup>47</sup> both upon humans as subjects and as aliens as objects of study and exploitation.

*District 9* does very little, perhaps, to illustrate possible alternatives to the social problems it explores. It instead leaves the “mapping of possible alternatives” to its audience. Alternately, Blomkamp invests in an exploration of the workings of power on the body—*District 9* sees the body as a site of commodification and alienation. If Wikus is literally alienated by becoming the body of an alien, his transformation is less shocking, and certainly less tragic, when viewed through the lens of his initial status as a corporate body and, ultimately, a commodity, already alienated from himself, if not from those around him. When Wikus’ transformation begins—epitomized in the moment his “prawn” hand appears—his status as a disposable MNU commodity becomes blatantly obvious, as he is made to participate in a series of gruesome weapons tests and then is put bodily onto the dissection table. Graham writes, “The first visible sign of Wikus’s mutation, the hand is what forces him out of his comfort zone—with its appearance suddenly he is treated as if not fully human, all his rights evaporate into thin air” (162). After this point, Wikus is treated as a commodity object, one to be captured and exploited to economic ends, even if it kills him.

It is well before this point, however, before the appearance of the “prawn” hand, that Blomkamp begins to explore Wikus’ alienation (from himself) and his status as a corporate body. When the film begins, Wikus is sitting at his desk in the MNU head office, where he heads

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<sup>47</sup> This is a well-established trope in dystopian fiction. One need only think of Oceania’s perpetual state of war in Orwell’s *1984* to see the ways in which the positing of an eternal Other is a source of power for a controlling regime.

the Department of Alien Affairs. Wikus tells his interviewer, “What we do at this department is we try to engage with the prawn on behalf of MNU, and on behalf of humans.” However genial his speech, Wikus’ words reveal him to be a divided figure, a worker in middle management in the corporate structure of MNU. His language seems internally contradicted: his speech contains traces of an equitable attitude toward the non-humans, but these traces are undercut by his comfortable use of the pejorative “prawn.” Indeed, not much later in the film, as Michael Valdez Moses points out, Wikus “orders the burning of an illegal ‘prawn’ hatchery [and] laughs light-heartedly for the camera when the alien fetuses start ‘popping’ in the ensuing fire” (157).

Though he has only a small measure of power as a management figure, Wikus knowingly participates in MNU’s regulatory relationship with the non-human population—though it eventually becomes clear that he does not grasp the extent of MNU’s abuses. In this way, Wikus is an instrument in MNU’s dystopian policies, implicated in ways beyond his knowing. Like Winston Smith, D-503 or other dystopian protagonists before him, Wikus plays a role in sustaining the powers that oppress him and others, though he handles it with the mundane demeanor of a bureaucrat—something he cannot seem to excise from his identity, even once he is on the run from MNU’s mercenaries.

Likewise, Wikus’ physical body seems inherently contradicted. His dress marks him as intermediary figure in the corporate structure of MNU. He is dressed neither in a suit (the dress of his father-in-law, boss and would-be executioner, Piet Smit) nor in purely functional attire (the dress of the working class in the film). Rather, Wikus wears a short-sleeve shirt and ugly tie, a poorly woven sweater vest and tight-fitting slacks, all of which are interrupted by a lanyard holding his identification badge. This dress, taken together with Wikus’ mustache, unshaven face and not-quite-right haircut, give him an awkward physical presence, one that seems to echo



his awkward placement in the corporate power structure. His dress is neither fashionable nor functional. No matter how earnest his attempt to appear natural, Wikus' body displays signs of alienation.

The contradictions visible in Wikus' demeanor and on his body mark him as someone unsuccessfully attempting to appear natural (or manly) in his social role. In the same fashion, the corporate power relations with which Wikus is initially imbricated have a hold on his speech and on his body. He works to “*emit signs*” of his participation in the system, signs that take shape on his body (Foucault, *Discipline* 25). In the opening of the film, these signs take the form of Wikus' posture, dress, and speech—all of which he visibly worries over. As he speaks to the camera, he casts about for the right words, fumbles with his clothing and posture nervously and constantly fidgets. He shows the film crew a picture of his beautiful wife, as if to reinforce his status both as a desirable partner and as a “normal” married man. Even as he works to emit signs of confidence and normalcy, however, his body undercuts his efforts.

Wikus' investment in appearing normal is also an investment economic capital—his desire to appear normal is intimately bound up with his desire to advance in his job, and he essentially contorts himself—both physically and psychically—to present the appropriate, corporate body to his staff and his bosses. To this end, Wikus governs the presentation of his body in various ways in the film. In addition to his attempt to “dress for success,” Wikus' investments in appearing normal become most obvious in his attempts to hide it when his body begins to transform into an alien body—a transformation which first manifests as sickness. In his desperation to present a “normal” body to his co-workers and boss, Wikus is essentially alienated from his own body, not because it is changing but because he effectively lacks the freedom to

confess its changes—all for fear that appearing “abnormal” will damage his economic usefulness and social status.

When first exposed to the alien biochemical technology that causes his transformation, Wikus is again appearing on camera, in one of the film’s many documentary-style moments. While “raiding” an alien shack, Wikus finds a hidden canister and takes it out to inspect. At first, he speaks to the camera in the voice of a knowing agent, intoning experience and knowledge. He tells the camera, “This [canister] has got the markings there, so it’s definitely alien. But it’s not a weapon...But I don’t trust it...” He is cut off when the canister opens and sprays a black fluid over his face. Wikus spasms, coughs, retches and almost immediately tells the cameraman to cut the take. When the documentary film restarts, Wikus is heard saying to the cameraman, “So you’re just gonna cut that part? Where it sprays me?” The camera stops again, then resumes again on Wikus—again clean and free of black fluid. He tells the camera, again in an authoritative voice, “We just found a dangerous object here. It has fluid in there that I suspect might leak onto people, or cause damage. So we just check that in, and we take that down nicely to the lab. It’s not a weapon, but it’s, it’s dangerous.”

Wikus’ attempt to effectively rewrite his mistake by editing the documentary camera stands as a perfect metaphor for his attempts to present a commoditized body to his superiors. Wikus’ desire to appear “normal” is driven by his linking together the normalized body and its economic value. This linkage holds great sway over Wikus’ sense of identity, since he has essentially bought into the discourse of bodily normality as indicators of economic viability. Indeed, as Miriam Fraser and Monica Greco point out:

A discourse organized around notions of the ‘normal’ thus has the effect (and is designed to have the effect) of devaluing all phenomena that fall outside or differ from the norm, designating them as modes of being in need of correction. Normality and the normal, therefore, are concepts that represent for the purpose of intervention. The idea of the

normal is intimately bound with that of a normative intention, a plan and an experience of normalization (17).

In other words, the discourse of normality fostered in Wikus' corporate environment yields material results in the form of his carefully normalized body and in turn causes him significant turmoil when his transforming body is no longer able to appear normal.

So great is Wikus' drive to appear normal that he attempts to hide his transformation, which he first believes is a simple sickness. As he sits at his desk, the evening of his exposure, he loses one of his fingernails. Panicking, Wikus carefully hides his injured finger and leaves his desk for the privacy of the restroom in order to examine his injury. It is later, however, at a party in honor of Wikus' promotion to chief field officer, that Wikus' drive to appear normal in front of his co-workers and boss becomes clearly visible. When Wikus first enters his home, he is unaware that anyone but his wife is present. In a hushed voice, he says to her, "I need to get to the toilet quickly. Baby, listen, I might have crapped in my pants." No sooner has he said these words, however, than the waiting group of celebrants shouts "Surprise!" Wikus' reaction is nearly immediate: he straightens up and begins to welcome people to his party, shaking hands all around and exchanging pleasantries, until finally he can no longer restraint his changing body, vomits black fluid and collapses atop a cake in his honor.

It is this overwhelming pressure to shape himself into a commodity, to become "a smoother, more perfect, more functional object for the outside world" (Baudrillard 278) that marks Wikus as a stranger to himself, alienated from his own body. As his transformation begins to take over, the power at work to normalize Wikus' body becomes visible in the aporia of his changing body. And it is after paying such careful attention to Wikus' body as the site of regulation and self-government that the film begins to explore the potential of the body to destabilize the naturalized boundaries upon which oppressive power often depends. Wikus'

body, so long the subject of regulation and self-government, instead becomes a visible embodiment of abjection, a grotesque and material reminder of the arbitrariness of smooth boundaries and, finally, an alien vision of possibility.

Among other things, Wikus' changed body acts to challenge Wikus' masculine, corporate, middle management identity (a process helped along, no doubt, by his brush with death at the hands of his father-in-law/ boss). His body forces a reevaluation of the boundaries of his social world, a reevaluation that begins with his own sense of self and sense of community. In the film's beginning, Wikus is, for better or worse, driven to be a "good" corporate subject, working at and for MNU. As such, he focuses his identity around the much-endorsed poles of human and alien. Furthermore, this sense of identity leads him to become compliant with MNU policies regarding human and alien interaction. Wikus is thoroughly a bureaucrat, clinging to the regulations to the point that it becomes farcical. He chastises one of MNU's mercenaries for carrying too much ammunition, going so far as to tell the mercenary commander, Koobus Venter (David James) that he should find ways of making his men more efficient. He gleefully shows his protégé, Fundiswa Mhlanga (Mandla Gaduka) how to abort incubating "unregistered" alien eggs. Even once his transformation begins, Wikus' overriding desire (at least initially) is to return to his previous state of being. Moses goes so far as to argue, "Wikus, after all, makes no bones about wanting his former (white) body back. He never loses his disgust for his alien(ated) form, never embraces his physical transformation as anything except a temporary and painful (if necessary) stage on the way to complete restoration of his old self" (160). And while this reading is ultimately reductive, it does serve to point out the strength with which Wikus' former identity holds him, even as it is an identity that is unkind, self-centered and openly malicious.

However, as Wikus approaches more closely his own abject status, his identity as human, defined as it is against the Other of the “prawns,” begins to shift as he sees a collapse of boundaries between himself and the Other. This shift can be seen most clearly in Wikus’ relationship to Christopher Johnson’s son, a young alien with whom he interacts throughout the film. As Wikus’ sense of identity changes, so also do his interactions with Christopher Johnson’s son. For instance, the first time the pair meet, Wikus, upon seeing the child, tells Fundiswa, “Ah, now you see. There’s just [alien] kids everywhere...this is why we get rid of them...that’s why we abort.” However, by the end of the film, the child is Wikus’ motivation for rescuing Christopher Johnson and fighting off MNU mercenaries, allowing the aliens to escape. He says to Christopher, “You go ahead...you can make it. Take your boy and go home. You have to make it. Don’t make me go through all of this and not make it.” The shift in Wikus’ understanding of and relationship to Christopher’s son—a shift that moves from viewing the child as a burden to viewing the child as a source of hope and with affection—is enabled by Wikus’ transformed, suffering body. As he moves closer to that which he previously considered abject, he begins (however slowly) to see clearly the dangers of the naturalized boundaries that his society has set for him.

In the context of *District 9*, Wikus’ transformed body opens to him a wealth of possibility that would have otherwise been closed. Not only does his undefined body allow him the strength to escape certain death several times over, it also opens to him the alien world of the “prawns” and allows him to begin to understand the other side of Other. Stefan Helgesson argues,

[Wikus] becomes a hybrid, one of ‘them,’ and yet remains the likeable antihero Wikus. The last point is crucial: despite his own disgust and the sheer abjectness of his transformation, the viewer’s sympathies remain with Wikus. This might well be the single most radical aspect of the film. Through his metamorphosis (shades of Kafka), Wikus effectively embodies the intolerable contradictions of the society he inhabits (174).

In the end, Wikus' body allows him to exist in the liminal space between boundaries—he is indeed “hybrid,” neither fully human nor fully alien, but empowered with the lived knowledge of both bodies.

Finally, in the film's closing shot, Wikus is utterly *alien*. Wikus' hybridity creates in him the possibility of a radically new identity. Precisely because he is neither human—clean edged and commoditized—nor “prawn,” his is a new kind of body, and a new kind of consciousness. Graham critiques the closing shot of *District 9*, arguing “even though in the final scene Wikus has fully metamorphosed into a ‘prawn,’ the entire film works through coaxing the viewer into sympathy and identification with his story, thus bolstering the premise that viewers would only respond with sympathy to the dilemma of a white male protagonist” (162). However, this assertion overlooks the positive potential of the ending: though the audience may eventually sympathize with Wikus, they are also implicated in that they identify with him. He is not an entirely likeable figure. Rather, he participates in the oppression of innocent others and perpetuates his own oppression by accepting at face value the mistaken notion that becoming a better commodity will yield him more autonomy—he warps himself to fit a mold. Furthermore, Wikus is a man constrained by social forces that operate upon his very identity. Though they may not live in an outright dystopian world, the audience does not have to look far to find all the same strains of repression, violence and commerce in human freedom that is on display in *District 9*.

Finally, however, Wikus' alien body becomes an emblem for radical difference. In the film's closing shot, as Wikus crafts a metal flower for his estranged wife, he glances briefly into the camera. In this moment, his eyes are visible: one is a yellowish “prawn eye,” the other is the icy blue of Wikus' original body. Here, in this last glimpse of Wikus, the film recapitulates the

body's power to produce difference and resistance to social constraint. Wikus is still transforming, still moving forward. He is, in some ways at least, in a space outside the boundaries of his repressive world. What is more, he embodies a radically different possibility for identity, one that is opened to a new kind of knowledge and a new experience of the world, through connection with difference.

In a way that echoes the role of disease in many of the postapocalyptic narratives discussed above, *District 9* offers a vision of the important role of allowing identity to be touched by difference. In his failure to maintain the status quo—whether in terms of identity, his own body, or his relationship to community—Wikus finds what he least expected: a new kind of freedom and a new kind of belonging. This belonging is no longer limited to his work-a-day corporate identity, nor it is tied intimately to his normative masculinity. In this way, he recalls characters like Robert Neville, characters who recognize a certain kind of truth in difference. Living in the wasteland (atop the ruins that comprise district 9), Wikus becomes a symbol for the possibility of finding life after the end of the world, all by letting go of the insatiable desire to remain the same, to live life unchanged and outside of the history he has always known.

Like the sudden appearance of the alien spaceship above Johannesburg, the sudden appearance of difference always brings with it the uncomfortable knowledge that one's identity is incomplete—a knowledge that identity will never be complete. And, in the very best of such confrontations, a second kind of knowledge comes along with the first, a knowledge that is deeply postapocalyptic: after the revelation that identity is never entirely stable and cannot be fully defended or immunized against change, possibilities begin to rise from the ashes, as it were, to offer avenues of meaningful connection and change. Failing to defend identity—or, as with Richard Neville, finally letting go of our own sense of what is normal—often means suddenly

seeing, sometimes for the first time, new possibilities for life in community with others. In the fates of the men and monsters discussed above—the vampires and zombies, the infected and alien—what shines through is not the trauma of losing one’s place in the world, it is rather the seemingly simple idea that, in the wake of the apocalypse, such a loss can offer the opportunity for discovering a new kind of world, one organized around connection rather than security.



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