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Zombies and Citizens

The Ontopolitics of Disaster in Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend*

"In this case the measles, um, virus which has been engineered at a genetic level to be helpful rather than harmful. Um, I find the best way to describe it is if you can ... if you can imagine your body as a highway, and you picture the virus as a very fast car, um, being driven by a very bad man. Imagine the damage that car can cause. Then if you replace that man with a cop ... the picture changes. And that's essentially what we've done." In the first scene of Francis Lawrence's movie *I Am Legend* from 2007, Dr Alice Krippin, played by Emma Thompson, proudly explains her cancer research to the TV viewers. "So you have actually cured cancer?" the journalist asks; "Yes, yes ... yes, we have." The next scene shows a deserted New York City three years later where grass has begun to sprout in the streets. What the research team has done, essentially, is creating a plague that has wiped out 90% of the human race and made the rest mutate into so-called Darkseekers, speechless monsters allergic to daylight and filled with cannibalistic rage.

Suddenly a very fast sports car comes racing down an empty avenue. Dr Krippin's figure of speech has turned into an objective fact, and this poses a question about the driver, the immune Robert Neville, played by Will Smith: is he a cop or a very bad man? Prior to the virus apocalypse, Dr Neville seems to have had some kind of medical job in the army, and in the post-apocalyptic New York, he uses his mixture of medical and military skills in his efforts to save the human race: he catches the Darkseekers, uses them as test animals in his basement laboratory, and kills them afterwards. The question is whether this biopolitical violence is helpful or harmful.

The Darkseekers are mutants, not remnants from the dead, and they move around like top athletes, not in the famous slow-motion stagger. But even if the monsters cannot be categorized as regular zombies, the movie unfolds in what I suggest calling a zombified space: a social space divided into two kinds of human beings with unequal ontological and legal status. It is the zombification of the post-plague New York City that turns Dr Krippin's slightly infantile distinction between the cop and the "very bad man" into the fundamental question of the movie. If the chasm cutting through social space is so deep that the Darkseekers do not have any human features at all, it could be claimed that the violence Neville uses is justified. Nevertheless, if the zombification is not com-

plete and they still qualify as some kind of fellow human beings with a claim to justice, his violence is criminal.

The modern zombie movie emerged with George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* from 1968. Novel and movie zombies also featured before 1968 but Romero transplanted the zombie motif from the gothic genre to the genre of the disaster movie. The modern zombie movie is, basically, a sub-genre of the disaster movie. According to a survey, zombie apocalypses happen to be the most frequent kind of disaster in the post-apocalyptic movies of the last decade (Drezner 2011, 2). Recent scholars conceptualize the intimate relation between zombies and disasters by pointing out the state of emergency as a central feature of modern zombie movies (Bishop 2010, 11; Canavan 2011, 175; Lillemose and Meyhoff 2011; Brooks 2003, 155). In *Night of the Living Dead*, for instance, before the current is cut, a TV speaker describes the situation as an "emergency". The centrality of the state of emergency in the zombie movie is evident and serves to explain the zombie movie's remarkable rise from the dead in the decade of the so-called war against terror following 9/11.

The problem, however, stems from how most scholars apply the concept of the state of emergency (or its synonym, the state of exception) as a catchphrase for the total breakdown of social order. In the first pages of *Political Theory*, Carl Schmitt underlines that "exception is different from anarchy and chaos" (Schmitt 1985, 12). As Schmitt writes, the state of emergency is not a collapse of all societal infrastructures but a conflict between the law and the medium of law. Medium, in this case, is not the language in which law is articulated but the social reality to which law is applied: "Every general norm demands a normal, everyday frame of life to which it can be factually applied and which is subjected to its regulations. The norm requires a homogeneous medium" (13). Zombified space is a heterogeneous medium in which the ontopolitical incongruity between citizens and zombies makes it impossible to apply the general norms of law. When zombies flood the streets, the "normal, everyday frame of life" breaks down (in German: the normal *Gestaltung der Lebensverhältnisse*, that is, the normal shape or formation of living conditions; Schmitt 1934, 19).

As Colson Whitehead writes in his remarkable zombie novel from 2011, the zombies, despite their wounds and panoply of leaking orifices, still proudly indicate the social tribes to which they had belonged thanks to their "gray pin-striped suits, classic rock T-shirts, cowboy boots, dashikis, striped cashmere cardigans, fringed suede vests, plush jogging suits" (Whitehead 2012, 243). Even though the zombies still display their former life as consumers, their lack of volitional and rational faculties mean that they have lost their life as legal and political persons. Thus, the question is whether the heterogeneity of social space is so grave that one has, at least for a while, to suspend law in order to fix

its medium – by putting down the ghouls with the classical headshot. According to Schmitt, this is the kind of question to which the sovereign supplies an answer: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 1985, 5). In Schmittian terms, then, the zombification of social space hinges on a sovereign decision that draws a line between those who count as legal persons and those who count as legally and politically dead.

In the following pages, I want to explore how the sovereign decision distinguishes between those inside and those outside its jurisdiction. Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben cannot help me in this exploration because of their "decisionist" and "exceptionalist" version of the state of emergency. To them, the sovereign decision is the political equivalent of the miracle: a single, inexplicable moment that takes place in a normless void outside the legal order. Fortunately, recent critics of Schmitt, and, consequently, of Agamben, have argued that the sovereign decision is much more "littered, layered, and complex than that."¹ The social order does not have a single main switch that the sovereign can push (This is, by the way, why "state of emergency" is a more appropriate term than "state of exception.").

Inspired by the criticism of decisionism and exceptionalism, I want to convey how the sovereign decision in zombie apocalypses does not come out of the blue. On the contrary, the decision is supported on a preceding and pre-verbal interpretation process that determines whether a certain kind of human being fits into the normal *Gestaltung* of the living conditions or whether it poses a threat to the social order. Like any other interpretation process, this ontopolitical interpretation is guided by pre-understandings, in this case a repertoire of concepts, images and stories about social life. With Charles Taylor, I suggest calling these socially shared ways in which social spaces are imagined a *social imaginary* (Taylor 2004, 23). Lawrence's *I Am Legend* is remarkably explicit in the way it exposes the social imaginaries that underlie the splitting of the social space into two opposing halves.

My argument proceeds in five steps. First, I will outline a theoretical framework that I hope proves helpful (not harmful) in conceptualizing the role played by social imaginaries in the zombification of social space. Second, I will sketch out the historical background for the zombified space in *I Am Legend*, exploring a similar chasm between zombies and citizens in earlier American disaster fiction, even if there are no actual zombies on the cast list. Third, I will present an analysis of *I Am Legend* focusing on the sovereign decision that draws a line

¹ I am quoting from Connolly 2005. See also the discussions of the "exceptionalist" version of the state of emergency in Honig 2009, Feldman 2010 and Lazar 2009.

between humans and Darkseekers. Fourth, I will contrast my methodological approach to the zombie movie with other approaches. Fifth, and finally, I will ask whether Lawrence's movie challenges or confirms the zombification of social space.

1 Expository Devices

In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls suggests a thought experiment in the classical genre of the state of nature and the social contract. In the "original position", future citizens meet outside society to develop the principles of justice. Since the contingencies making citizens socially advantaged or disadvantaged still remain hidden behind a "veil of ignorance", the parties meeting in this original position are able to enter into an unbiased and rational discussion of the basic structure of society. They are unable to feather their own nest as they do yet not know which nest is theirs. According to Rawls, this theoretical fiction functions like an "expository device" that helps us in analyzing and discussing the basic structure of society (Rawls 1999, 19).

Since the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, fiction writers have adopted disasters as a similar thought experiment. "This is Ground Zero. This is my site. I can fix. I can fix this," Neville claims when the virus disaster unfurls. In the terms of political theory, the Ground Zero of modern disaster fiction represents a close relative of the original position of modern philosophical prose. State of emergency and state of nature are two analogous versions of a generic space outside society where it becomes evident what you have to do to fix society from scratch. In other words, I am suggesting a functional similarity between catastrophism and contractualism. However, there is one crucial difference between using the state of nature and the state of emergency as an expository device. In Rawls' original position, the parties assemble to discuss *how* to allocate social goods between them, but they do not discuss *who* counts as a relevant addressee for the distribution of goods. Rawls conceives society "for the time being as a closed system isolated from other societies" (Rawls 1999, 7, 229). Nobody is moving in or out of this society and nobody is caught in a liminal state between inside and outside. To keep matters brief, Rawls' version of the expository device fails to expose the question of who is present in the original position.

By contrast, the Ground Zero of disaster fiction questions neither the substance nor the procedure of justice but, first of all, the scope of justice. In Hannah Arendt's famous sentence, the problem is not the specific rights of citizens but the basic right to have rights (Arendt 1979, 296–297).

In *Spheres of Justice* (1983), Michael Walzer formulated an important critique of distributive justice that has served as a matrix for philosophical discussions of justice from Aristotle to Rawls. According to Walzer, there is a kind of justice which is not about the distribution of social goods among the members of a society but rather about the distribution of membership itself: "When we think about distributive justice [...] we assume an established group and a fixed population, and so we miss the first and most important question: who constitutes that group?" (Walzer 1983, 31). Since Walzer's book, political philosophers have begun to pay attention to the first and most important question about the scope of justice. The task has been to figure out what justice means if "not just the 'what' but also the 'who' is up for grabs," as Nancy Fraser writes in a recent book (Fraser 2008, 15). If you want the concept of justice to account also for the constitution of the group, it swells to a much broader concept that not only covers the legal rules and rational principles governing the distribution of social goods. Formulated with Carl Schmitt – who, until recently, has played a modest role in this tradition – the question of the scope of justice has shifted the theoretical focus from the norm of law to the medium of law: it is not *Gesetz* but *Gestaltung*, not the legal norms but the basic formation of the living conditions that determine who counts as a subject of justice.²

Judith Butler discusses a similar issue in her latest book: "Part of the very problem of contemporary political life is that not everyone counts as a subject," she asserts in *Frames of War* (Butler 2009, 31). Butler's account is useful for a conceptualization of the zombified space of modern disaster fiction for two reasons.

First, Butler's analysis of contemporary political landscape is guided by the concept of the state of emergency. Her examples are the detainees at Guantanamo Bay and other illegal combatants in the global war on terror who, in the West, are not perceived as worthy of protection or even as worthy of grief. Like Walzer, Butler asks how the group of right-bearing subjects is constituted, but in the global perspective of the war on terror, the question of the scope of justice is not simply a matter of membership or non-membership of a nation state. On the other hand, she does not, as Agamben does, make a sweeping claim about the state of exception as the hidden matrix and *nomos* of modern societies

² In recent theory of justice, you can find different approaches to conceptualizing what Schmitt hints at with his idea of a *Gestaltung* of living conditions. Charles Taylor refers to the medium of law as a "framework", a "background against which the principles of distributive justice must operate". According to Taylor, this framework, which he later calls a social imaginary, determines who counts as a "subject to whom distributive justice is due" (Taylor 1985, 295).

(Agamben 1998, 167). To Butler, local states of emergency create a perforated and heterogeneous normative order in which “certain lives are regarded worthy of protection while others are not, precisely because they are not quite ‘lives’ ” (Butler 2009, 50).

Second, Butler focuses on the processes that draw the line between those inside and those outside the political fabric of life. Unconcerned with the legal procedures of citizenship, Butler explores the cultural processes taking place in the social imaginary: “How do the norms that govern which lives will be regarded as human enter into the frames through which discourse and visual representation proceed, and how do these in turn delimit or orchestrate our ethical responsiveness to suffering?” (77). In Butler’s vocabulary, a frame is a mode of public seeing (Butler 2004, 147) or a mode of intelligibility (Butler 2009, 149) that determines how different kinds of human beings enter into “the realm of appearance” (140).

According to Butler, the politics of rational rules and principles is based on a politics at an “ontological level” (138). In this context, “ontology” is not a question of what human beings actually *are* but of how they *appear to be* to the public mind. In William Connolly’s terms, Butler’s central argument is that our ethical responsiveness to other human beings is orchestrated on an ontopolitical level, not on the level of formulated norms.³

With Butler’s own example, the pictures the US Department of Defense published from the Detention Camp at Guantanamo Bay framed the detainees as non-human creatures. In this case, the framing was a dense network of metaphorical *as if*s transforming the detainees into faceless and abject non-humans: in their chicken cages, with manacled hands and goggles, they were represented as if they were caged animals, as if they were mentally ill, or even as if they were dead (Butler 2004, 72).

One could summarize Butler’s theory of the dehumanizing frames in Carl Schmitt’s terms. According to Schmitt, the state of emergency is a situation in which the heterogeneous medium of the law blocks the application of legal norms. In Butler’s argument, the Schmittian distinction between the law and the medium of the law is mirrored in a distinction between the normative and the descriptive: on the one hand, the compendium of moral and legal norms, on the other hand, the definition of specific phenomena. Normally, we understand

³ “*Onto*, because every political interpretation invokes a set of fundamentals about necessities and possibilities of human being, about, for instance, the forms into which humans may be composed and the possible relations humans can establish with nature. An ontopolitical stance, for instance, might strive to articulate a law or design set into the very order of things” (Connolly 1995, 1).

a judgment as an application of a moral or legal norm to a neutral phenomenon. The point that Butler stresses, however, is that the distinction between the descriptive and the normative is confused since the norms – understood as the frames governing the linguistic and visual representation of the phenomenon – are already at work at the descriptive level formatting the ontological status of the phenomenon: “the judgment is built into the definition (we are, in fact, judging before knowing)” (Butler 2009, 155). Even before we start thinking about the rights of the detainees at Guantanamo Bay, we perceive them as less than human. Butler teaches us that the zombification of social space is not just due to the objective differences between the creatures but, first of all, by the “differential operations” of a social imaginary (77).

2 Voight-Kampff Devices

“My name is Robert Neville. I am a survivor living in New York City. I am broadcasting on all AM frequencies. I will be at the South Street Seaport everyday at mid-day, when the sun is highest in the sky. If you are out there ... if anyone is out there ... I can provide food, I can provide shelter, I can provide security. If there’s anybody out there ... anybody ... please. You are not alone.” In his daily radio broadcast, Neville implicitly draws a line between those he will provide protection for and those he will provide protection against. He is willing to help his fellow human beings to whom he refers to as “anyone” and “anybody”, but he is unwilling to protect the Darkseekers since they are not included in the pronouns “anyone” and “anybody”.

Had the question been how Neville and the Darkseekers should distribute food, shelter and protection among themselves, it would have been a classical problem of distributive justice. Instead, Neville’s radio message poses a question of the scope of justice: do the Darkseekers count as members of the human community? Do they belong to the circle of those entitled to a share of the social goods? The negative answer to this question is not given by Neville’s sovereign decision but, rather, by his preconscious interpretation of the Darkseekers as humanoid beings that cannot be included in the pronouns “anyone” and “anybody”. In zombified space, the “veil of ignorance” falls so deep that it hides not only the Darkseekers’ social status in a future society but also their ontological status as human beings.

The question of the scope of justice is also present in the works of disaster fiction that inspired *I Am Legend*. The most obvious precursor of the movie is, of course, Richard Matheson’s novel *I am Legend* (1954), of which Lawrence’s mov-

ie is the third adaption so far. In Matheson's original version of the story, a nuclear war has turned the human race into vampires. Robert Neville, who happens to be immune, spends his lonely days in Los Angeles by driving spikes through the bodies of sleeping vampires. More than once, however, he feels an urge to justify his acts of violence: " 'You can't abide by Robert's Rules of Order in the jungle,' he said. 'Believe me, it's the only thing I can do. Is it better to let them die of the disease and return – in a far more terrible way?'" (Matheson 1999, 136). In this case Robert's Rules of Order, a codification of American parliamentary law, function as a synecdoche for justice as such. It should be noted that Neville, unconcerned with the substance of these rules of order, poses the question of their scope. The monsters simply do not show up on his radar of justice. In the vocabulary of Carl Schmitt, the post-apocalyptic "jungle" is not the kind of homogeneous medium required by the norm of law. By the way, George A. Romero has admitted that *Night of the Living Dead* basically was a rip-off of Matheson's novel (Kay 2008, V); the structural similarity between Romero's zombie apocalypse and Lawrence's virus disaster is, to some degree, a matter of common sources.

Another important precursor is Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), based on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968). In fact, Scott worked as co-writer on the early drafts of the script of *I Am Legend* before Warner Bros. dismissed him and hired Lawrence. In the bleak post-apocalyptic world of *Blade Runner*, after a nuclear war has wiped out most animals of the planet, the pressing problem seems to be drawing the line between humans and genetically engineered organic robots. For that purpose, the protagonist Rick Deckard repeatedly runs the so-called Voight-Kampff device to make sure that the test person is really a human being and not a replicant (or an android, as the fake humans are called in the novel). The interpretive tool measures respiration, "blush response", heart rate, and eye movement in response to emotionally provocative questions. If no human empathy is measured, the test person is shot dead on the spot. The Voight-Kampff device is a modern version of the emblematic balance of justice – with the important difference that it measures not the substance but the scope of justice.

Apart from great images of deserted cities and crumbling infrastructure, the most interesting thing about modern disaster fiction is that it exposes the process of drawing a line between those inside and those outside the jurisdiction. Fictional disasters have a tendency to create what I call a zombified space: they do not just decimate the human race, they also divide it into humans and non-humans. Already in Heinrich von Kleist's short story "The Earthquake in Chile" from 1806, one of the founding texts of modern disaster fiction to emerge out of the rubble of the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, the disaster and the ensuing state

of emergency split the survivors into members and non-members of Chilean society (Holm 2012). Even if there are no zombies on the role list, the disaster creates a "zombified" space. By exposing the zombification of social space, modern disaster fiction demonstrates that sovereign decisions do not hover in a vacuous and miraculous void. Instead, sovereign decisions are based on sovereign interpretations, hermeneutic practices that take place in a dense cultural space. A sovereign will always be in need of some kind of Voight-Kampff device.

3 Framing the Darkseekers

"Behavioural note – an infected male exposed himself to sunlight today. Now it's possible decreased function or growing scarcity of food is causing them to ... ignore their basic survival instincts. Social de-evolution appears complete. Typical human behaviour is now entirely absent." This note, dictated by Neville to his computer after having observed a Darkseeker behaving strangely earlier the same day, is an interpretation. He starts out from a specific detail – the Darkseeker's exposing itself to the sunlight to which it is allergic – and moves from there to a general interpretation of all Darkseekers as completely dehumanized. Since Neville is sitting in his basement laboratory dressed in a white coat, it seems as if he bases his interpretation of the Darkseekers on their objective behavioral features. However, his judgment is already built into his linguistic description of the Darkseeker as "an infected male" (as opposed to "an infected man"). Later on in the movie, he refers to a female Darkseeker as "it" (as opposed to "she"). Even before the scientific interpretation, Neville's use of language has excluded the Darkseeker from the human pronouns "anyone" and "anybody". Hence, the zombification is not just a physiological but also a cultural process. Neville's sovereign decision about the Darkseekers' non-human status is based on a preceding and pre-conscious interpretation in which his social imaginary frames the ontopolitical status of infected. They are monsters because of a rhetorical mutation and not just because of a genetic mutation.

My first example of this rhetorical mutation is a metaphor. Before Neville dictates his behavioral note to his computer, in a flashback at the very beginning of the movie, he is driving his car, trying to get his wife and daughter out of New York City before the state applies its biopolitical power and quarantines the city. Suddenly, the first Darkseeker of the movie hits the windshield in a short, nearly subliminal image. (The scene is, by the way, a quote of the first zombie attacking the car of the female protagonist at the beginning of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*). In the next scene, Neville wakes up alone in his fortified home

at Washington Square Park and goes down to his basement laboratory to check the infected rats on which he has tried different samples of cure for the virus. The rats are kept in small cages and when Neville draws aside a curtain, a rage-infected rat attacks and slams against a glass screen.



Fig. 1: Darkseeker smashing into windshield



Fig. 2: Rat smashing into the glass wall of its cage

In rhetorical terms, the relation between these two images is a metaphor: the colors, the lights, and the movements are similar, the only difference is that the enraged Darkseeker is substituted by an enraged rat. In this case, the zombification is not determined by a scientific determination of the Darkseeker's objective qualities but rather by the metaphorical exchange of qualities between the

image of the Darkseeker and the image of the rat. Neville's hard science is based on a network of soft analogies. In Deleuzian jargon, one would talk about the "becoming-rat" of the Darkseeker, his *devenir-rat*, but then one would probably forget that this transformation is a deprivation rather than an emancipation: the Darkseeker is not free but Neville is free to execute his rat-like test-animals with impunity.

My second example is an apostrophe. In a deserted DVD shop, Neville keeps returning to a pretty female mannequin. After his dog dies, he finally approaches the mannequin, turns his head toward her, starts to cry and talks to her: "I ... I promised a friend I would say hello to you today ... Please say hello to me." In Greek, *apostrophein* means turning away: in an apostrophe, the speaker turns away from his human addressee and directs his speech towards an inanimate object or an abstract concept. In this case, Neville addresses a doll as if it was a human being with which he could enter into some kind of relation. The idea of turning implied in the original Greek meaning of *apostrophein* is dramatized when Neville, in a slow and stylized movement, turns his head toward the mannequin. Talking in apostrophes is basically saying "Please say hello to me" to an inanimate world.

Neville's turning of his head is, in fact, the very turning point of the movie since the apostrophic mode of address creates a real human being. It seems as if the apostrophe has a performative power that can turn a non-human object into a human. The Charlton Heston adaptation of Matheson's novel, *The Omega Man* from 1971, refers a little crudely to the Greek legend of Pygmalion and Galatea: as Neville talks to one of the mannequins, she actually is transformed into a living woman. In Lawrence's *I Am Legend*, the performative power of the apostrophe sets in with a delay: Neville leaves the DVD shop and drives down to the docks to lance a suicide attack on the Darkseekers – only to be saved by a real woman, the immune Anna.

To sum up, Neville's interpretation of the infected is informed by a social imaginary that, in Paul de Man's terms, can be defined as a "tropological system" (de Man 1984, 254). The Darkseekers become visible through a dense network of tropes and figures that orchestrate their ontological and legal status.

4 What Are They?

As we have seen, Neville's sovereign decision about the Darkseekers' non-human status is based on a preceding interpretation informed not only by their objective features but also by the network of tropes and figures that frames his

ethical responsiveness toward them. Methodologically, this means that we have to distinguish between two kinds of images in the movie. On the one hand, the Darkseekers are fictional figures that move around in the reality of the movie and to which we, as interpreters, can choose to attribute different kinds of symbolic meaning. On the other hand, the rat-metaphor and the mannequin-apostrophe are speech-figures that are not present as objects in the fictional reality but are, instead, applied by Neville to interpret the reality around him (we saw the same at two levels in the first scene of the movie where the very fast car was used as a figure of speech by Dr Krippin only to reappear as a real car in the reality of the movie).

Contemporary research in zombie apocalypses tends to focus on the first kind of images, asking about the symbolic meaning of the zombie. The answer has been that we must interpret the zombie as an image of the hypnotized modern consumer (Shaviro 1993, 92), of the terrorist (Bishop 2010, 29), of the victims of biopower (Canavan 2011, 175), and so on. In this article, however, I have explored the second kind of image. Instead of proposing another interpretation of the zombie figure, I have been analyzing the tropes and figures through which the fictional characters themselves interpret the zombie. If we wish to understand the zombification of social space in *I Am Legend*, the important thing is not what the Darkseekers mean but how they become meaningful to Neville.

Barbara, one of the first zombie victims in film history, cries out “What are they?” in the beginning of Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*. Since then, modern zombie movies include an on-going zombie interpretation which, however, never seems to supply a satisfying answer to Barbara’s question. In Colson Whitehead’s abovementioned zombie novel the fictional characters’ incessant interpretation of zombies is even a dominating theme. *Zone One* is a story about a group of *sweepers*, a kind of volunteer who cleans any remaining zombies out of downtown Manhattan. With ethnographical precision, Whitehead analyses how these *sweepers* interpret the zombies, for instance by giving them imaginative names (a *skel*, a *dead*, a *hostile*, an *unfortunate*, etc.) or by playing callous Abu Ghraib-style games with the killed zombies.

In one scene in the novel, two groups of *sweepers* have just met up with each other on Fulton Avenue in the financial district as a *skel* suddenly comes staggering toward them:

The skel wore a morose and deeply stained pinstripe suit, with a solid crimson tie and dark brown tasseled loafers. A casualty, Mark Spitz thought. It was no longer a skel, but a version of something that predated the anguishes. Now it was one of those laid-off or ruined businessmen who pretend to go to the office for the family’s sake, spending all day on a park bench with missing slats to feed the pigeons bagel bits, his briefcase full of empty potato-chip bags and flyers for massage parlors. The city had long carried its own

plague. Its infection had converted this creature into a member of its bygone loser cadre, into another one of the broke and the deluded, the mis-fitting, the inveterate unlucky [...] This creature before them was the man on the bus no one sat next to, the haggard mystic screeching verdicts on the crowded subway car, the thing the new arrivals swore they’d never become but of course some of them did. It was a matter of percentages (Whitehead 2012, 121).

In this description, it is easy to pin down the symbolic meaning of the zombie: the zombified businessman looks like “a casualty”, one of those who ran out of luck in modern capitalism where success is a matter of percentages. The link between zombie and loser is based on the novel’s underlying metaphorical analogy between the zombie disaster and modern disaster capitalism. It is important to realize, however, that it is the protagonist that sees the zombie in this way: “A casualty, *Mark Spitz thought*.” The description is not about the zombie itself, it is, rather, about the way the *sweepers* perceive the zombie: “This creature *before them ...*” Rather than just using a given social imaginary, the novel is analyzing the images through which the fictional characters interpret their post-apocalyptic world. Before the disaster, the socially shared images of social life were used to draw a small-meshed net of distinctions dividing different social groups from each other; after “Last Night”, only one line is drawn, namely the border between humans and *skels*. In the terminology of Jacques Rancière, the distribution of the sensible has turned into a crude dichotomy between Us and Them. This simplification of the social imaginary is analyzed when one of Mark Spitz’s *sweeper* colleagues gets bitten by a *skel*:

He found it unlikely that Gary was not in ownership of a master list of racial, gender, and religious stereotypes, cross-indexed with corresponding punch lines as well as meta-textual dissection of those punch lines, but he did not press his friend. Chalk it up to morphine. There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them (Whitehead 2012, 231).

5 Could They be Evolving?

According to Judith Butler, the practice of critique is the practice of framing the frames. Instead of just seeing the world through the frame, we need to learn to see the frame that blinds us, “exposing the orchestrating designs of the authority who sought to control the frame” (Butler 2009, 12). As we have seen, *I Am Legend* functions as an expository device that lays bare Neville’s pre-conscious framing of the Darkseekers as non-human. But does the movie in fact criticize the tropological system that guides Neville’s interpretation of the Darkseekers or does it rather confirm it? Is his social imaginary put to test or just put to work?

It is important to note that Neville's picture of the Darkseekers is indeed called into question as the story evolves. Still at the beginning of the movie, Neville sets a snare trap to capture a Darkseeker in order to test a promising serum against the plague. He lures a female Darkseeker into the trap with a little blood just as he would do if he wanted to catch a beaver or a raccoon. Apparently, the rat-metaphor not only determines the way Neville sees the Darkseekers but also the way he acts towards them. The next day, however, Neville is puzzled as he finds one of the mannequins from the DVD shop out in the street in front of Grand Central Terminal. As he approaches this second mannequin, he is caught in a snare trap and passes out. If the Darkseekers have managed to copy his snare trap, the de-evolution of their rational capacities cannot be complete. In one of the deleted scenes, which can be found on YouTube, Neville tries to convince Anna that the Darkseekers could not have set the trap: "That's my snare, these are my materials. The infected didn't do this, they can't." According to Neville's interpretation of the Darkseekers, "they have no higher brain function, they don't plan." Later, however, in another deleted scene, he starts to vacillate: "Could they be evolving?"

It is remarkable that these two scenes were cut out. In the official version of the movie the story of the Darkseekers' evolution, and of Neville's growing awareness of it, is repressed, which turns the scene with the Darkseekers' snare into a meaningless cul-de-sac. The movie simultaneously tells a story about evolution and a story about the eradication of the Darkseekers and this conflict surfaces in the movie's two contrasting endings. In the original ending, now available as extra material on the Two-Disc Special Edition of the movie, Neville, Anna and the boy Ethan retreat to the basement laboratory chased by a horde of Darkseekers that have broken into the house. The three humans, together with the female Darkseeker that Neville caught for his experiments, are still protected behind a reinforced Plexiglas wall when they discover that the female Darkseeker has started to turn into a human being. Apparently, Neville has finally found a serum against the plague. However, time is short since the leader of the Darkseekers is smashing into the protecting Plexiglas wall that begins breaking up.



Fig. 3: Darkseeker attacking plexiglass wall

As the leader of the Darkseekers draws a butterfly-shaped smear on the Plexiglas, Neville suddenly realizes that the female Darkseeker caught on the human side of the Plexiglas has a butterfly tattoo. In other words, it seems as if the leader tries to communicate that he wants the female Darkseeker back, presumably his wife or his daughter. The last time Neville saw his own wife and daughter, the daughter drew a butterfly on the window of the helicopter before it crashed. Thus, the butterfly, a classical symbol of the soul, is a token of the matrimonial or fatherly love shared by Neville and the Darkseeker. Neville puts down the gun, opens the door, and in a kind of wordless contract he gives back the female to the male Darkseeker and is, in recompensation, spared by the horde of Darkseekers who peacefully leave the building. In the terms of political philosophy, this is a social contract turning the lawless state of nature into political society.

In the original ending, both metaphor and apostrophe reappear but in transformed versions. When the male Darkseeker smashes into the Plexiglas wall, he looks very much like the first Darkseeker smashing into the windshield and the rat smashing into the glass wall of its cage. Hence, the picture continues the zombifying metaphor from the first half of the movie. The important difference, however, is that the glass wall is gradually breaking down. What we see in the original ending is a deconstruction, in a very literal sense of the word, of the rhetorical border between humans and non-humans.

While the leader attacks the Plexiglas wall, Neville turns his head towards the Darkseekers outside the wall and talks to them: "I can save you." With his newfound serum, an efficient biopolitical tool, he can provide health and hu-

manity. In rhetorical terms, this is another example of an apostrophe, only this time Neville does not turn his head toward a lifeless mannequin or a speechless dog but, for the first time in the movie, toward the Darkseekers. It seems as if this mode of address is sufficient to turn the Darkseekers into human beings.

If you replace the very bad man with a cop “the picture changes,” Dr Krippin explained in the first scene of the movie. In the original ending, the metaphor and the apostrophe are transformed and this changes the picture with the Darkseekers replacing Neville the cop with Neville the very bad man. After the wordless contract between Neville and the Darkseekers, the camera turns toward a wall full of Polaroids of Darkseekers that were used as test animals in Neville’s scientific experiments. Our knowledge of the matrimonial or fatherly love of the leader turns these Polaroids into a memorial wall with pictures of crime victims. In the original ending Neville’s last words are: “I am sorry.” In the new normal after the plague, we understand, the Darkseekers are rights-bearing human beings and not just rightless test animals.

To be sure, the wordless passion between male and female Darkseeker, accompanied by a romantic piano *adagio*, is kitsch. Suddenly, the Darkseekers obtain an ideal humanness defined by traditional family values. A similar de-zombification is found in Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009) in which the non-human aliens, known by the derogatory metaphor *prawns*, suddenly prove to be even more family-minded than the humans. Driving out of New York City towards a survivors’ stronghold in Vermont, Neville, Anna and the boy pass an idyllic family of lions with two cute cubs playing in the street. It seems as if the expansion in the scope of the human is balanced by a narrowing of the substance of the human. However, the original ending still revises and retracts the zombifying rhetoric with which the movie starts out. The picture changes.

In the official version, however, the butterfly and the wordless contract are replaced by a hand grenade. Here, the butterfly tattoo, the token of humanness, has moved from the female Darkseeker to Anna, who was a human being from the very start. While the leader attacks the Plexiglas wall, Neville gives a vial of cure-containing blood to Anna so that she can save humanity and he then just grabs a hand grenade and blows himself up along with the Darkseekers. After Neville’s death, Anna and the boy find food, shelter and protection in the survivors’ gated community. While Anna is handing over the serum to one of the survivors we hear her voice in a voice-over:

In 2009, a deadly virus burned through our civilization, pushing humankind to the edge of extinction. Dr Robert Neville dedicated his life to the discovery of a cure and the restoration of humanity. On September 9th, 2012, at approximately 8:49 P.M., he discovered that

cure. And at 8:52, he gave his life to defend it. We are his legacy. This is his legend. Light up the darkness.

Anna’s voice-over pays homage to the sovereign violence used by Neville. At the end of the day, he was not a very bad man but a hero cop who sacrificed his life in the struggle to restore humanity. In the original ending, Anna has a parallel voice-over that ends with the words “Keep listening. You are not alone.” In the official version, Anna’s summons to listen is replaced by a summons to lighten up the darkness. Apparently, there is no need to be ethically responsive to the Darkseekers. In the terminology of the state of emergency “Light up the darkness” means: use justified violence in order to subject heterogeneous social space to the regulations of law. In this way, Neville keeps the promise he makes to his daughter in one of the flashbacks of the movie: “Daddy’s gonna make the monsters go away.” In a Manichean logic of light and darkness, it is easy to draw the line between the “We”, who are Neville’s legacy and the rest, who are not included in the victorious “We.” In a situation in which a hand grenade is the only weapon at hand, “Light up the darkness” simply means: blow up the Darkseekers.

During Anna’s voice-over, the camera lifts to a birds-eye perspective on the survivors’ classic American village. In the same movement, the perspective leaves behind the rhetorical network that governed Neville’s interpretation of the Darkseekers. In her homage to sovereign power, Anna in the official version speaks in a demonstratively non-figurative language of facts and figures, titles and clock-times: Dr Robert Neville discovered the cure at approximately 8:49 p.m. and gave his life at 8:52. This is not a moment of truth in which the objective facts finally penetrate the “veil of ignorance” created by the social imaginary. Instead, it is a moment of ideology. After the tropes and figures of the social imaginary have created the ontopolitical picture of the Darkseekers, the ladder is kicked away. The inherent violence to Neville’s interpretation of the infected is hidden from sight. In this way, a product of rhetoric is transformed into a fact of nature: an unbridgeable and unchangeable chasm between zombies and citizens.

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Hazardous Future

Disaster, Representation and the Assessment of Risk

**Edited by
Isabel Capelo Gil and Christoph Wulf**

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