

The Corporeal New York City of *I Am Legend* (2007)

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New York mint testi város a Legenda vagyok című filmben.

Absztrakt: A posztapokaliptikus fantáziák meghatározó képe a romos város, ami azonnal érzékelhető megmutatkozását nyújtja a kataklizma és az ember által elfoglalt tér találkozásának. Tanulmányom ezt a relációt vizsgálja Francis Lawrence 2007-ben bemutatott, *Legenda vagyok (I Am Legend)* című posztapokaliptikus akcióthrillerének New Yorkján keresztül. A film szinte elsőként ábrázolja a katasztrófa sújtotta metropolisz városképét a 2001. szeptember 11-i terrortámadás után, így teret engedve a terhelt esemény emlékezetpolitikai vizsgálatának. A film kataklizmatikus ikonográfiája a romos várost horizontális, ledöntött testként ábrázolja. A vertikális helyét a város egészét elfoglaló természeti és poszthumán erők veszik át, ami jól szemlélteti, miként lépnek korábban marginális terek meghatározó szerepbe a posztapokaliptikus urbánus térben. Az immár dominánssá váló, a testet az épített környezettel összevető tér ugyanakkor az ember fogalmát is megkérdőjelezi – a *Legenda vagyok* pedig két alternatívát is állít ennek megválaszolására.

Abstract

The image of the city in ruins is a fundamental part of post-apocalyptic fantasies, providing a tangible manifestation of the encounter between the cataclysm and urban, man-made spaces. This article examines this relation through the depiction of New York City in Francis Lawrence's post-apocalyptic action thriller *I Am Legend* (2007). The film is one of the first motion pictures to revive the image of the ruined cityscape post-9/11, offering an examination of the tragic and contentious event through memory politics. The cataclysmic iconography of *I Am Legend* demonstrates the wrecked city as a horizontal, demolished body. Verticality is replaced by natural and posthuman forces that have conquered the entire metropolis, highlighting the ways through which previously marginal sites become dominant in post-apocalyptic urban spaces. These sites, where the urban is linked to the corporeal, also question the very notion of the human—*I Am Legend* offers two alternate endings in response.

Introduction

September 11, 2001, shook the core of the American psyche like no other event in recent collective memory; until then, the cataclysmic fantasies that were depicted on screen had remained unrealized. Max Page summarizes this virtual state with an illustrative metaphor: “our popular culture has been in dress rehearsal for the city’s destruction for decades” (Page, 2008, 199). Previous cataclysmic fantasies, such as the nuclear holocaust, did not end up happening, nor did New York become an overpopulated hive city, an apprehension very much palpable in the 1970s and 1980s. Arguably, the Vietnam War was one of the first moments in the history of the United States during which the dominant narrative about American exceptionalism became contested. As Marita Sturken argues, “a singular, sanctioned history of the Vietnam War has not coalesced, in part because of the disruption of the standard narratives of American imperialism, technology, and

masculinity that the war's loss represented" (Sturken, 1998, 163). 9/11 has generated similar discourses—although from an even closer angle. The event during which the nation "has lost its innocence" (Sturken, 2004, 311) created a collective air of fear, which also manifested itself materially, specifically in the form of dust. After the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center had crumbled to pieces, an expansive layer of dust remained in their place. This tangible reminder of the traumatic event was sensitive and multi-layered: not only did it contain the scatter of building materials and personal or business-related items, but the remains of the dead as well. Opened to the public in 2014, the 9/11 Memorial Museum, as Sturken (2015, 484) notes, also houses unidentified human remains, which is still regarded as a deeply controversial issue.

The trauma of 9/11—largely due to its sensitive and controversial aspects mentioned above—was not featured by works of popular culture for a long time. This was the case with apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic films as well, which, according to Page, shifted their location to other cities, particularly to Los Angeles (Page, 2008, 209). As Benczik notes, although Hollywood productions slowly reincorporated the cityscape of New York back into disaster films, the urban landscape remained untouched (Benczik, 2015). The role of mediatization during and after the tragic event also influenced the absence of the disaster-stricken New York, a common cinematic site before. Suddenly, fantasy transformed into reality on the screens of millions. How could cinema, with its largely fictional, diegetic world, compare with its nonfictional counterpart? How could a disaster film feature New York in shambles through a sensitive yet illustrative lens? The matter was also determined by the position these works sustained in the political arena. The main political agenda—which framed the events in accordance with the good-versus-evil binary, mostly advocated by the Bush administration—greatly defined cultural products after the attack (McSweeney, 2014, 4). Arguably, those post-9/11 films that finally reintroduced the trope of the exposed New York skyline contributed to acts of collective, public commemoration. Not only do they portray the interwoven web of political, cultural, and historical narratives, but they also demonstrate discursive ways of adhering to, challenging, and processing these traumas and contradictory accounts.

In this article, I analyze how the 2007 film *I Am Legend* (directed by Francis Lawrence) presents these relations through the fractured cityscape. The urban landscape of the film—which omits the World Trade Center site—is both visually and narratively linked and likened to the corporeal. First, the film illustrates an infected and posthuman New York City, filled with vampiric mutant Darkseekers, who seek shelter in the depths of abandoned buildings. The city, however, is also conquered by the forces of nature, the flora and fauna. This is the environment in which the protagonist, the virologist Robert Neville (starring Will Smith), finds himself after the mutation of the Krippin virus takes hold of the city. The urban landscape—the decaying body—overruled by this binary occupation challenges him to renegotiate personal and collective traumas as well as the very idea of what it means to be human after the cataclysm. As the power structure of

the dominant–marginal binary transforms, post-apocalyptic spaces and bodies gain a renewed understanding, creating third spaces and third bodies, which grant the opportunity for the protagonist to challenge pre-established narratives. However, the two alternative endings of the film—the theatrical and the director’s cut—reveal two distinctly opposing attitudes: one that aligns with the emblem of American heroism and another that emphasizes the need to surpass this grand narrative through the redefinition of urban and corporeal spaces.

The Reemergence of Cinematic Disaster Following 9/11

After September 11, the term “ground zero” began to be used in reference to the attack on the World Trade Center. As Sturken (2004, 311) summarizes, ground zero entails a complete nuclear annihilation and, at the same time, it also suggests “a starting point, a tabula rasa,” specifically in the post-9/11 architectural discourse of New York City. This conveys the idea that for many, the event was equal to an apocalypse—one that left lasting marks on the American identity. According to Akiva Goldsman, the writer and producer of *I Am Legend*, the lingering memory of 9/11 was crucial in constructing the cataclysmic iconography of the film:

“[T]here is no question that 9/11 is now part of our imaginations [...] it turned out to be impossible to tell a story about the end of the world without this recent catastrophic event that seemed to promise, in our imaginations for a second, the end of the world.” (McSweeney, 2014, 169)

This impossibility appeared as a wound in public imagination, although in an ambiguous way: the wound represented a ubiquitous and lasting symptom, one that may never be healed—yet it also manifested itself as a wound that should be healed swiftly. The dichotomy of the inability to forget and the desire to forget determined the response of early works of popular culture. This was further complicated by the difficulty of verbalizing and portraying the trauma: as Page explains, many criticized the culture of disaster films after September 11, accusing it of desensitizing the public attitude toward real-life tragedies (McSweeney, 2014, 207).

The ecological fears that characterized the social milieu of the 1970s and 1980s appeared with even greater intensity after the millennium. As the scientific discourse concerning climate change and global warming entered the public arena, genre films presented environmental disasters systematically. The common feature of these cataclysmic fantasies is that they (1) emphasize the detrimental impact of human civilization on the natural world and (2) highlight human weakness in the face of environmental forces. Hurricane Katrina, the 2005 catastrophe that gravely affected New Orleans, contributed to the rise of ecological fears. The tragic event reminded the nation that climate change can jeopardize the existence of entire cities, especially coastal ones (Page, 2008, 225). Besides the need to rethink the role of political and individual action in environmental

matters, concerns arose regarding the question of “what it means to be human” in this renewed, ever-changing landscape. Posthumanist discourses highlight the need to re-define the relation between the natural and the human amid the declining dominance of the anthropocentric narrative. With the rising number of disaster films, the posthumanist paradigm shift also infiltrated the screens of destruction. According to McSweeney (2014, 158), the genre of the zombie film experienced a noticeable return after the 2000s. The zombie, the human-turned-Other, reinforces the monster type that Weinstock (2020, 368) calls the “invisible monster”: films such as *I Am Legend* showcase infected nonhumans whose bodies have been “invaded” by a mutated virus.

I Am Legend is one of the first post-9/11 films to revive the image of New York in ruins, transformed by the cataclysm, without the World Trade Center site. The 2007 film, which is based on Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel of the same title, revolves around virologist Dr. Robert Neville, who appears as the only human survivor of the disastrous Krippin epidemic. After an artificially manipulated measles virus—which was developed as a cure for cancer—mutates and wipes out most of the population, only Neville and the Darkseekers—mutated zombie-like, vampiric creatures—remain alive in the city. Neville is immune to the virus and forced to hide in the confines of his Manhattan apartment with Sam, his German Shepherd. He spends his days hunting deer, gathering supplies from deserted stores, and, most importantly, experimenting on rats and captured Darkseekers to find a cure for the Krippin virus. He also transmits recorded radio broadcasts and awaits the arrival of others. When Anna and Ethan, two survivors from Maryland show up on their way to an alleged survival camp in Vermont, Neville’s effort to save humanity becomes even more crucial. Nevertheless, in the end, he is also compelled to decide the fate of the Darkseekers who, in the meantime, have begun to show signs of physical and emotional advancement.

“This is Ground Zero. This is my site.”¹

In “Walking in the City,” Michel de Certeau elaborates on the idea of the “wave of verticals,” the “celestial eye” of metropolises, most notable in New York City’s World Trade Center (Certeau, 1993, 152–153). For de Certeau, this verticality is expressed in the innate connection between the dichotomy of above and below, the state of being a voyeur and a walker. When one, instead of remaining in the invisible grasp of the top of the tower, descends to the surface and becomes a walker—that is, how a city is produced, by the very act of walking, according to de Certeau. This concept offers an intriguing framework for post-apocalyptic discourses. Following the cataclysm that has destroyed the population of New York City, the urban landscape of *I Am Legend* no longer offers verticality and the potential of vertical voyeurism. The World Trade Center, the example that de Certeau offers to symbolize the act of voyeurism, has ceased to exist in the world of

¹ Lawrence, 2007, 14:18.

I Am Legend. Both Neville and the Darkseekers hide in ground-level spaces, and, unlike in alien invasion films, they only expect a threat at the ground level as well. The body, the vertical line on the horizontal surface, has fallen. This shift from vertical to horizontal extends to the whole city and highlights the idea that the collapse, metaphorically, represents the fall of the collective body of humanity.

Themes of vacancy, vulnerability, and invasion also echo the image of the dead zone—a site now occupying the whole cityscape. In urban studies, as Gil Doron (2008, 206) contends, dead zones are commonly located on the fringes of the city. However, as he argues, these badlands have never been entirely empty or dead; historically, they have been occupied by marginalized communities and presented their own unique cultural features (Doron, 2008, 204). The dead zone involves the element of the Other: it is constructed by spatial juxtaposition, retaining some aspects of the dominant social order, yet also containing its marginalized counter-sites. Doron (2008, 209) continues by contending that the site of the dead zone represents a piece of living history with its unrestored architectural ruins. These ruins are often reclaimed by nature and, therefore, constantly shaped, altered, left to be marveled upon, and incorporated in community life. Natural invasion is more celebrated than despised and is viewed as an inseparable part of the man-made environment. In *I Am Legend*, similarly to pre-apocalyptic dead zones, environmental forces enter the city as the manifestation of the Other: the man-made metropolis is invaded—or recaptured—by the flora and fauna, lying surrendered without its previous inhabitants.

The connection between the corporeal and the architectural is fueled by intriguing diegetic and extradiegetic forces in the film. The monstrous Darkseekers and their dark, desolate hiding places highlight the survival of repressed individual and collective memories. László Munteán (2011, 11) cites Gail Weiss's account on 9/11, who uses the profound term "urban flesh" to express the metaphorical connection between these two aspects, specifically in relation to the collapse of the Twin Towers. In *I Am Legend*, the main source of diegetic trauma is also connected to the body: it is the Krippin virus, an artificially reengineered microorganism that forces Neville to admit that humanity is responsible for its own downfall: "God didn't do this, Anna. We did," he exclaims (Lawrence, 2007, 1:10:50). The extradiegetic aspect lies in the lurking presence of the 9/11 attack, during which strongly upheld, collective notions became contested. The Darkseekers and their habitation at Ground Zero suggest that these narratives need to be renegotiated in the new environment: the Darkseekers represent the lurking physiological presence of invasion within the organic body and its reflection within the urban body as well. According to Robert Yeates, the sight of the ruin can be likened to the sensation of the uncanny, famously formulated by Sigmund Freud. Citing Nicholas Royle, he contends that the uncanny adds another meaning to the beginning: that it is "already haunted" (Yeates, 2021, 4). In *I Am Legend*, the uncanny environment is paired with its uncanny monsters, further emphasizing the partly familiar and partly unfamiliar character of

the post-apocalyptic urban space, where the sites of remembrance and future possibilities coexist in an intricate hub.

The corporeal–architectural relation is a noticeable allegory in the film from the beginning. The opening depicts a pre-apocalyptic television interview featuring Dr. Krippin (played by Emma Thompson), the chief virologist responsible for the treatment of cancer. Krippin describes the relation between body and virus with the following passage:

“If you can imagine your body as a highway, and you picture the virus as a very fast car being driven by a very bad man, imagine the damage that that car could cause. But then, if you replace that man with a cop, the picture changes. And that’s essentially what we’ve done.” (Lawrence, 2007, 01:30)

As Stefanopoulou (2021, 43) observes, the scene ends abruptly to reveal the contrasting image of the demolished, deserted New York City three years later: “vegetation dominates the urban landscape, and the birdsong continues: we realize that the apocalyptic disaster has paved the way for a new, non-human world.” The high-angle shots—both static and mobile—initiate the viewer into the wholly transformed urban landscape: the city lies half-sunk, covered in layers of vegetative life. The urban sounds are only those of the city’s constant physical decay: crumbling walls, rusty lampposts, and shattering windowpanes. The dead zone has now spread to the whole city. To animate the metaphor given by Dr. Krippin in the opening scene, this scene features both the “very fast car” and the “very bad man:” the peaceful yet haunting environment is disturbed by the appearance of Neville and his car, the first sign of human life. The shot remains in a bird’s-eye view, observing the giant cityscape and its contrast with the emergence of the miniature, accelerating car. The visuals further strengthen the metaphor, illustrating an almost medical perspective.

It is intriguing to look at Neville’s attitude toward the dominance of the Other as formerly marginal: he attempts to regain control over the city that was once almost exclusively monopolized by human forces. Thus, he frequently goes on hunting trips to capture the deer that have become part of the city’s fauna; however, he is unable to catch any. By assuming the role of the hunter, Neville maintains the image of the previous hierarchy between the two microcosms, the man-made and the natural. However, he is continuously confronted by the contrary. In the first hunting scene, he is blocked by a group of cars, rendering further chase impossible. Nonetheless, the deer escape easily in the urban jungle. Neville follows the animals, although he is now forced to abandon his car—the material signifier of his previous position—in order to blend in. Finally, when he comes close to shooting, mountain lions appear, and Neville finally decides to leave his prey behind. The renewed cityscape forces Neville, the last (hu)man of the city, to revise his position both as a city dweller and a human.

With Us, against Us, or Somewhere in Between

According to MacCormack (2020, 532), “monsters in themselves are created through a bordering and create bordering encounters.” Arguably, the monster, as a hybrid entity, lives in the hyphen, between two identity forms that are simultaneously joined and disjoined over and over. In the case of *I Am Legend*, which also belongs to the subgenre of the “infection film,” the hyphenated state is further enhanced by a sense of invisibility (Murray Pomerance quoted in Weinstock, 2020, 368). In infection films, the body becomes a battleground of opposing forces, and the process of becoming infected often remains invisible to the naked eye. In the cityscape, this in-between state produces liminal landscapes that mirror the monstrous Others. As the virus invades the body, its environmental materialization demonstrates invasion: during the day, the Darkseekers remain in *no-go zones*, in hiding places where light cannot enter. During nighttime, however, they roam the city. The urban landscape is thus ruled by two Others, both of which challenge the anthropocentric narrative. By day, Neville must face the invasion of the urban landscape by the inexterminable vegetative life, while at night, he must seek shelter in the confines of his home to avoid the raids of the Darkseekers. Since the film shows the events from Neville’s perspective, the viewer only sees the Darkseekers during their interactions with Neville. Thus, their hiding place is also featured in relation to Neville’s actions. When Neville enters the dark, mysterious warehouse, the monstrous Others appears as an immediate threat. This threat is twofold: according to Weinstock (2020, 368), infection films portray monsters that either pose a danger in the form of death or in “monstrous transformation.” In *I Am Legend*, the Darkseekers represent both.

The Darkseekers seem to be liminal characters in terms of their position on the spectrum of marginality and centrality as well. Their most crucial weakness, which is also Neville’s only chance for survival, is their vampiric, nocturnal lifestyle: once sunlight hits their skin, they burn alive. Their spatial presence is thus also twofold and limited, which echoes Neville’s experience. The two opposing spatial attitudes are juxtaposed in Neville’s laboratory, where his desire to regain control continues: he captures a female Darkseeker to find the cure and tame the monsters once and for all. Matters are further complicated when Neville realizes that despite the cataclysm, the process of evolution has not come to a halt: the Darkseekers begin to show signs of adapting to their environment, gaining the ability to endure light. This suggests that in the future, the Darkseekers, previously marginalized by their biological handicap, will “invade” the rest of the urban—and nonurban—landscape. The theatrical ending subscribes to the elimination of this threat: after handing the cure, the vial of blood, to Anna, Neville blows up both the Darkseekers and himself. He fails to recognize the possibility of co-existence, seeing the only solution in the extermination of the past. The alternate ending, available on the Blu-Ray edition, represents a completely different approach. The Darkseekers attack Neville’s home to reclaim the captured female Darkseeker. Neville recognizes that their intent is not to harm him and the others and decides to return the

Darkseeker. He is surprised to witness that the creatures he has thought of as the monstrous Others are capable of showing emotions. Ultimately, he is forced to reconceptualize his own humanity: his strenuous experiments have resulted in the death of multiple Darkseekers. This also demonstrates the shift of the human–nonhuman or monstrous–nonmonstrous reference points I have mentioned previously: Neville begins to question the innate concept of human exceptionalism and recognizes the monstrous within himself. Both Neville and the Darkseekers survive, suggesting that Neville has accepted that the previous, pre-cataclysmic spatial hierarchy is to be overruled by a “live-and-let-live” attitude. The sequel to *I Am Legend*, allegedly premiering in 2025, will utilize this alternate ending to meditate on the future of humanity (s. n., 2023).

As McSweeney (2014, 170) contends, the haunting presence of 9/11 is a palpable extradiegetic element in Neville’s world. McSweeney (2014, 171) cites Michael Bell’s theory of the “ghosts of place,” which expresses the presence of memories, traumas, and allusions as inseparable from their environment. In this framework, the Darkseekers can be interpreted as the materialized ghosts of the city, reminiscent of humanity’s hubris and Neville’s own burden of guilt. As a leading military virologist, he also took part in the development of the cure. The Darkseekers and the city they have conquered invoke flashbacks in Neville, resulting in the constant intrusion of the past through the urban landscape. The theatrical ending’s killing scene also puts an end to the possibility of renegotiating these memories: they are forever lost. Although the cure is found and is safely on its way to Vermont, the threatening memory of the city is left untouched, un verbalized. Instead, Neville assumes the role of the heroic and masculine American. Thus, the mainstream ending of *I Am Legend* subscribes to the dominant narrative represented in the disaster films of its time, while the alternate ending suggests that the future only starts after encountering the monstrous self. The last scene of this version illustrates Neville and the survivors leaving New York City on the Washington Bridge, signifying that there are still bridges to be crossed rather than burned.

Conclusion

Why New York City? As Page contends, “to destroy New York is to strike symbolically at the heart of the United States” (Page, 2008, 14). The metropolis arguably occupies a central position in the American imagination and is a frequent landscape of post-apocalyptic cinematic fantasies. This is even more highlighted post-9/11, when the city saw an unthinkable catastrophe, which only became a metaphorical narrative and visual subject of disaster films in the second half of the 2000s. The conflicting landscape of *I Am Legend*—where vegetative and posthuman life thrive as opposed to human hegemony—establishes a screen for the renegotiation of individual and collective identities through the metaphorical relation between the architectural and the corporeal.

Questions of selfhood, however, also test the former notions of human existence through the emergence of posthuman entities. The urban Other is mirrored in the bodies of the Darkseekers, representing Neville's suppressed individual and collective traumas. This metaphor also surrounds him in the form of the invaded city, where he struggles to maintain the former hegemony of mankind. These anxieties culminate in two different endings, proposing a dual attitude toward the relation of humanity, nonhumanity, and in-between humanity to themselves, others, and the immediate environment.

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