

Dorothea Schuller

“SOMETHING BLACK
AND OF THE NIGHT”

Vampirism, Monstrosity, and Negotiations of Race
in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), about a lone survivor in a post-apocalyptic world inhabited by modern vampires, is the first major vampire novel of the 20th century and a direct response to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). While replacing the supernaturalism of Stoker's Gothic horror with science fiction elements, Matheson's text is similarly concerned with issues of racial 'otherness' centering around the liminal figure of the vampire and exhibits the same preoccupation with clean, unclean or mixed blood. This essay discusses the complex relationship between vampire fiction and discourses of race and monstrosity by analysing *I Am Legend* and its 2007 screen adaptation, whose manipulations of the original plot produced a film expressive of American attitudes towards science and religion after 9/11.

Richard Mathesons Roman I Am Legend (1954), der von einem einsamen Überlebenden in einer von modernen Vampiren bevölkerten postapokalyptischen Welt handelt, ist der erste wichtige Vampirroman des 20. Jahrhunderts und eine direkte Antwort auf Bram Stokers Dracula (1897). Zwar ersetzt Mathesons Text das Übernatürliche in Stokers Schauerroman durch Elemente der Science Fiction, doch auch er befasst sich mit dem Thema des 'Anderen', das der grenzüberschreitenden Figur des Vampirs angelagert ist, und ist wie jener von der Idee des 'reinen', 'unreinen' und 'vermischten' Blutes besessen. Der Aufsatz untersucht das komplexe Verhältnis zwischen Vampirgeschichten und Diskursen über das Fremde und das Monströse, indem er den Roman I Am Legend und seine Verfilmung von 2007 untersucht – wobei die Veränderungen des Originalplots in der Filmversion die amerikanischen Haltungen gegenüber der Wissenschaft und der Religion nach 9/11 widerspiegeln.



“Friends, I come before you to discuss the vampire; a minority element if there ever was one [...]. I will sketch out the basis for my thesis, which thesis is this: Vampires are prejudiced against. The keynote of minority prejudice is this: They are loathed because they are feared” (Matheson 26). This concise outline, which could almost stand as a synopsis of my paper, is a quotation taken from *I Am Legend*, the American writer Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel about a lone survivor in a post-apocalyptic world inhabited by modern vampires. Early in the story, the novel’s protagonist, Robert Neville, is engaged in a drunken conversation with himself. Playing devil’s advocate to his own belief in the necessity to kill as many vampires as possible, he improvises a satirical mock-lecture directed at an imaginary audience, in which he lays out the mechanisms involved in the long history of what he terms “prejudice” directed against blood-drinkers. Fear is identified as the emotion which prompts the seemingly natural human wish to rid the world of vampires. In the context of the novel, this fear may be described more specifically as a form of xenophobia – in the 20th century, dealing with vampires is a socio-political, not a metaphysical issue. As Robert Neville points out in his little speech, the vampire belongs to an oppressed minority: “He has no means of support, no measures for proper education, he has not the voting franchise. No wonder he is compelled to seek out a predatory nocturnal existence” (Matheson 26–27). Neville’s inebriated call for equal rights for vampires is chillingly interrupted when his true feelings about the issue under debate are revealed: “Sure, sure, [...] but would you let your sister marry one?” (Matheson 27). While their status as a group of disenfranchised people suggests a whole number of metaphorical readings in which vampires may represent any minority group within a given society, this final comment, with its reference to miscegenation, clearly sets up a parallel between vampirism and racial difference. Written shortly before the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, *I Am Legend* thus resonates with the “cultural anxieties of a white [1950s] America” (Patterson 19). In this essay, I will discuss some aspects of the complex relationship between vampire fiction and negotiations of race, which, in the Gothic tradition, are closely related to issues of monstrosity. I

will be focusing on *I Am Legend*, comparing it to both Bram Stoker's seminal *Dracula* (1897) and the most recent film version of Matheson's novel, directed by Francis Lawrence and starring Will Smith as Robert Neville.

Both the novel and its cinematic adaptations¹ form a marked contrast to most of the popular stories about vampires written after *Dracula*. Today, with readers swooning over *Twilight*'s angelically handsome (if rather boring) Edward Cullen or the glamorous Lestat of Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, the tortured Angel of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or the sexy undead of HBO's *True Blood*,² most of our contemporary vampires, however strongly they may differ from one another, seem to elicit emotions very different from fear and loathing in readers and audiences. The trend to romanticize the vampire began as early as 1819: In his genre-defining story "The Vampyre," John Polidori turned the unappealing monster of folklore – a walking corpse who preys on its living relatives – into an attractive, if somewhat pale, aristocrat. Lord Ruthven, modelled on Lord Byron, is a welcome guest at London's most fashionable parties not despite, but because of his "peculiarities" (Polidori 108). The shift from fear to fascination, from metaphysical dread to empathy, can perhaps most clearly be seen in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 *Dracula* adaptation, somewhat unhappily titled *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. While restoring much of the novel's narrative detail and luxuriating in an atmosphere of Symbolist decadence, the film also fundamentally rewrote its central character, presenting Dracula as a tor-

¹ The two earlier adaptations are *The Last Man on Earth* (Ubaldo Ragona, 1964) starring Vincent Price and *The Omega Man* (Boris Sagal, 1971) with Charlton Heston.

² References are to the following books, films, and TV series: The *Twilight* series, Stephenie Meyer's bestselling young-adult fiction novels, starting with *Twilight* (2005, filmed by Catherine Hardwicke in 2008); Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, starting with *Interview with the Vampire* (1976, filmed by Neil Jordan in 1994); the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, which aired from 1997–2003, and its spin-off *Angel* (1999–2004); *True Blood*, the still-running HBO series created by Alan Ball and based on the Sookie Stackhouse novels by Charlaine Harris, which premiered in 2008.

mented, romantic figure. Marketed as a dark love story, not as a horror film, the film's tag line, consequently, was "Love never dies".³

The vampires of *I Am Legend* are not sublime, supernatural monsters, but savage hordes who snarl and howl outside Robert Neville's door and seem to have degenerated from intelligent human beings to mindless animals. The contemporary American vampires of *I Am Legend* – despite their pale faces – are coded as racially 'other' throughout the novel and represent a fear of contamination by different races similar to that which can be found in 19th century Gothic fiction (cf. Malchow and Edwards). They are "something black and of the night" (Matheson 23), a description which refers both to their uncanny link to a superstitious past and their racial difference. Instead of a single, powerful and possibly attractive vampire, *I Am Legend*, for most of the time, presents us with the "unwashed masses among the *nosferatu*" (Pharr 94), creatures described (or denounced) as "filthy", "black bastards" and "black unholy animal[s]" (Matheson 11, 30, 106). Published in the 1950s, before the 20th century's obsession with the figure of the vampire had reached its second peak,⁴ the vampires Neville is confronted with are much closer to the walking dead of folklore than those of Hollywood. Gone are the opera cloaks, Hungarian accents and sardonic one-liners forever associated with Bela Lugosi's iconic portrayal of Dracula in Tod Browning's 1931 film classic. Matheson's deliberately anti-romantic take on the vampire myth, which swerved from the

³ The same tag line also appears on the recent HarperTeen edition of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, accompanied by a sticker that proclaims, in reference to the two protagonists of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series, "Bella & Edward's favourite book." The conjoining of Dracula and Heathcliff in the course of marketing a classic Gothic novel for a new readership probably mostly interested in romance is fitting as they have both equally suffered from a tendency to make their characters more palatable to cinema and TV audiences. Interestingly, it was Richard Matheson who introduced the reincarnation plot into the Dracula myth. In his screenplay for Dan Curtis' 1974 TV adaptation of Stoker's novel, Dracula (played by Jack Palance) is a warrior-prince roaming the earth in search of his lost love, a plot device which was picked up by James V. Hart in his script for *Bram Stoker's Dracula*.

⁴ The first wave might be said to have started in Europe with Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), followed by America's love-affair with Bela Lugosi both on stage and film.

path taken by 20th century popular culture, did not catch on immediately. Vampire films of the 1950s and '60s, especially the Technicolor extravaganzas produced by the famous British Hammer Studio, still focused on the aristocratic, fascinating and highly erotic vampire, with plots mostly set in a somewhat vague European past.⁵ Matheson's future vision of an America peopled by the undead and unwell did, however, serve as a blueprint for the genre of the modern zombie movie launched in 1968 by George A. Romero's highly influential *Night of the Living Dead*, a film equally noted for its manifold allusions to contemporary politics.⁶

Metaphorically, the literary vampire has often come to stand for an abject 'other' against which societies define themselves and their notions of normalcy. Dracula might be said to represent almost everything Victorian England seemed to fear: He is an aristocrat (not middle class), Eastern European (not English), sexually deviant (not strictly heterosexual), protean (not possessing a fixed and unchanging body), beast-like (not fully evolved) and, of course, neither properly alive nor dead. Over the last two decades, after years of focusing predominantly on the novel's complex sexual subtexts, the critical literature on *Dracula* has increasingly drawn attention to its negotiations of political, ideological and racial issues, highlighting its

⁵ In 1957, Matheson wrote a screen-play based on his novel for Hammer called *The Night Creatures*. It was, however, deemed too gruesome by the censor and was therefore never green-lighted for production (see Dawidziak). One year later, Hammer launched their *Dracula* series with Terence Fisher's *Dracula*, the first of many films starring Christopher Lee as the Count.

⁶ *Night of the Living Dead* was the first American film to cast an African-American actor (Duane Jones) in the heroic leading role. His character manages to survive the attacks of the undead, but is tragically killed by trigger-happy rednecks in the final scene. The film, shot in black and white in the style of TV news and photojournalism, evokes images of the assassination of Martin Luther King and the Vietnam War. For readings of Romero's film see Wood and Meteling. In an interview, Matheson commented on the films based on his novel: "Well, the closest we've come to *I Am Legend*, I think, is *Night of the Living Dead*" (qtd. in Dawidziak 213). The shuffling undead of Romero's film might have been inspired by the first movie adaptation of *I Am Legend*, the Italian-American production *The Last Man on Earth*, for which Matheson co-wrote the screen-play under his pseudonym Logan Swanson.

expression of fin-de-siècle fears of reverse colonisation, degeneration and de-evolution.⁷ With hundreds of films directly or loosely based on Stoker's text which portray the Count as an alluring figure, it is easy to forget that the novel does not attempt to make Dracula appealing to its readers. While going a bit overboard in the opposite direction, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) is in fact much closer to Stoker's portrayal of Dracula than most later films in its depiction of the vampire as a repulsive figure with clear marks of bestiality who arrives from the superstitious East to bring disease and destruction to the more civilized West. Dracula may be immortal and versed in black magic, but he represents – according to Dr. Van Helsing – a case of arrested development. He has “a child-brain” (Stoker 264) and is thus no real match for the more evolutionarily advanced Englishmen, their American friend and their Dutch leader. The vampire's association with bad blood and disease (in Murnau's film Count Orlok literally is a plague-carrier) and his marked physiognomy have led critics like Judith Halberstam to read Stoker's novel as an example of late nineteenth-century antisemitism. Matheson's dystopian horror novel stresses these very negative aspects associated with vampirism to produce a work of keen social criticism. *I Am Legend*, written as a direct answer to *Dracula*, is similarly concerned with issues of racial ‘otherness’ which center around the liminal figure of the vampire and exhibits the same preoccupation with clean, unclean or mixed blood. Blending American Gothic with science fiction, Matheson's novel drives a stake through the romanticism often attached to vampires, especially in their Hollywood incarnations. Like Stoker's *Dracula*, it may be read as a story about the cultural construction of the vampire as a monstrous, inverted mirror image of everything a society doesn't want to be identified with.

Robert Neville, a white, middle-class American, is the lone healthy survivor of a global epidemic. A highly infectious germ produces symptoms similar to common traits of vampirism: The infected live on blood, shun the sunlight and are repelled by garlic.

⁷ See Arata's influential essay and Malchow.

Those who have died of the disease will return from their graves as brain-damaged undead, serving as mindless hosts for the germ. Holed up in his Los Angeles house by night, drinking, smoking and listening to the hordes of vampires outside, Neville spends his days tracking them down in their houses, where they lie in a day-time coma, killing those he can find by driving a stake through their bodies or, once he has worked out this more efficient method, by dragging them outside into the sunlight. Despite his brief moment of drunken clarity cited at the beginning of this essay, Neville is a direct descendant of Dr. Van Helsing, committed to destroying all vampires without ever questioning the moral rightness of his actions.

As the months go by, Neville, who feels like "a weird Robinson Crusoe" (Matheson 77), teaches himself the basics of physiology, learns how to use a microscope and is finally able to isolate the germ responsible for the mutation of humankind. He dubs it "*vampiris*" (Matheson 79). In the course of his research, he manages to explain scientifically all the usual traits of vampirism found in folklore.⁸ While this method of demythologizing vampires might be regarded as a science fiction element, it also harks back to Ann Radcliffe and the early Gothic of the 'explained supernatural.' With nobody around to share his findings with, Neville becomes a lone beacon of enlightenment: "All the centuries of fearful superstition had been felled in the moment he had seen the germ" (Matheson 80).

The novel's plot takes an interesting turn when Neville's daily routine of killing and surviving is interrupted by his encounter with a seemingly equally healthy woman, Ruth. His paranoid suspicions that, despite her 'normal' appearance and behavior, she might still be infected after all, turn out to be true when he tests her blood and finds a mutated form of the vampire germ. At this point in the story, the increasingly fanatic Neville "won't believe anything unless [he] see[s]"

⁸ Much of what is now considered common knowledge about vampires was in fact invented by Stoker or introduced into the mythology by film-makers. Matheson's vampires die when exposed to sunlight like Count Orlok in *Nosferatu* or Dracula in Fisher's adaptation. In Stoker's novel, Dracula walks about during the day, though he can shape-shift only by night. See Miller 51ff.

it in a microscope” (Matheson 126). Disregarding Ruth’s obvious sanity and humanity, he is still determined to kill her should he find out that she is “one of them” (Matheson 120). After months of isolation, Neville has developed an idiosyncratic racist outlook: Regarding his own ‘pure,’ uncontaminated blood as the norm, those who deviate from it are considered dangerous and have to be killed. Since his ethnicity is explicitly mentioned at the beginning of the novel, Neville’s definition of human life seems to be restricted to “middle class white heterosexual male” (Patterson 21). As Kathy Davis Patterson has pointed out, there is “an air of genocide” (20) about Neville’s efforts to wipe out all vampires, though he perceives his systematic killings to be necessary acts of self-preservation. Evoking memories of the one-drop rule,⁹ Neville’s fear that Ruth may be passing as a ‘normal’ woman despite her contaminated blood casts the vampire in the role of the half-breed, whose mixed blood makes identification using an either/or logic impossible. In his book on race and 19th century Gothic, H. L. Malchow convincingly argues that “[b]oth vampire and half-breed are creatures who transgress boundaries and are caught between two worlds. Both are hidden threats – disguised presences bringing pollution of the blood” (168).

Ruth runs off and leaves a letter which tells her story: She is a spy, sent by a group of infected humans who are able to endure the sunlight and have found a way of living with the disease by taking a drug containing defibrinated blood. They have, in short, evolved into a new human species. Even though Neville shares their view that the truly undead vampires are nothing more than dangerous animals who have to be exterminated, he is appalled when he witnesses the gleeful slaughtering of the outnumbered deranged creatures by the new society’s assigned killers. Neville himself is regarded by the vampire-humans as a legendary monster, “the last of the old race” (Matheson 157), who has stalked them during the day when they

⁹ For a discussion of American Gothic and racial ambiguity see Edwards, who reminds us that “in antebellum America [...] one drop of African American blood separated slave from master” (xxv).

were helpless. The novel ends with Neville taken prisoner by the new race of humans. He escapes public execution by taking suicide pills provided by Ruth.

Since the reader has spent the whole novel inside Neville's head, the introduction of Ruth and the final twist come with a very effective change of perspective. Neville is suddenly forced to give up his position as a representative of the majority when Ruth's letter informs him that "we may decide to kill you and those like you" (Matheson 145). Wounded and waiting for death, he is now able to identify with the 'old' vampires, whose mass execution he has witnessed. Even though the novel's conclusion hints at another dawn for humanity, the new society is hardly perfect; it is equally dependent on the construction of monstrous 'others' to be used in the process of self-identification. The story has come full circle: Robert Neville, the last human, becomes the mythic 'other,' a minority group of one, hated because he is feared. His final realization is shattering: "I'm the abnormal now. Normalcy was a majority concept, the standard of many and not the standard of just one man" (Matheson 160). Robert Neville has become the vampires' vampire, a "terrible scourge they had never seen, [...] an invisible specter who had left for evidence of his existence the bloodless bodies of their loved ones" (Matheson 160). In his last moments, he realizes that he is the monster who resides in a kind of Gothic haunted house which he only leaves – like Dracula – to hunt and kill. His firm belief that he is doing the only thing possible in his situation is only ever questioned when he meets Ruth, whose husband, it turns out, he has killed. Never entertaining the idea that the germ might mutate and that there might still be hope for the human race, Neville has become a mass murderer of innocent sick people. The closing lines of the novel sum up his final enlightenment: "Robert Neville looked out over the new people of the earth. He knew he did not belong to them; he knew that, like the vampires, he was anathema and black terror to be destroyed. [...] A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever. I am legend" (Matheson 160).

Intriguingly, much is made of Robert Neville's ethnicity in Matheson's novel. Right in the first chapter he is described as being "born

of English-German stock” (Matheson 8), with blue eyes and blond hair. Somewhat stereotypically, he has inherited his technical skills and his talent for scientific research from his German father and a love for classical music, mostly that of Mozart and Beethoven, from his mother. Since he likes to play his classical records at full volume to drown out the animal-like snarling and howling of the vampires outside, his house not only functions as his personal sanctuary but also as the last bastion of White Western civilization. That this civilization is ultimately doomed is foreshadowed by the description of Neville’s house with its boarded-up windows as “a gloomy sepulcher” (Matheson 10).

The casting of the African-American actor Will Smith in the role of Robert Neville in Francis Lawrence’s 2007 film adaptation of *I Am Legend* might thus be seen as reversing the configuration of the book’s racial subtext. Yet even though the infected are portrayed as albino-white mutants and the updated version of Matheson’s protagonist is a black scientist who draws mental strength from listening to Bob Marley songs, the question of race no longer seems to be one of the central issues. After *The Last Man on Earth* (Ubaldo Ragona, 1964) and *The Omega Man* (Boris Sagal, 1971),¹⁰ the 2007 version is the first film based on the novel which uses its proper title. However, despite this nod to the source text, the film fundamentally rewrites the original plot. The result is a story expressive of contemporary America’s attitudes towards science, religion, and terrorism.

The first major change concerns the origin of the deadly bacillus. In the novel, the vampire germ has been around for centuries, but Neville is the first to identify it as the source for the global belief in the existence of vampires. Due to horrific dust storms, the side effects of (probably atomic) bombings, it becomes a global threat. In

¹⁰ *The Omega Man* is notable for casting an African-American actress (Rosalind Cash) as the love-interest for Charlton Heston’s Robert Neville. Patterson is doubly wrong in her assertion that “Neville is killed before the relationship is consummated, but the desire between [him and Lisa] is clear and contextually coded as dangerous” (21). Neville and the equally tough Lisa fall in love and they do consummate their relationship before Lisa is infected and Neville is killed.

the 2007 film, the uncanny virus itself is man-made. The movie starts with a short TV interview with a new character, Dr. Alice Krippin (played by Emma Thompson), who informs the public that she and her medical team have found a cure for cancer by genetically altering the measles virus. This seems to suggest that the annihilation of humankind as we know it is a direct result of the arrogant wish of scientists to master nature by meddling with it. With this prologue, the tone is set for a story which moves towards a mystical-religious ending completely at odds with the spirit of the original novel. Echoes of *Frankenstein*, itself a mixture of the Gothic and science fiction, continue with Will Smith's Robert Neville, still mourning the death of his wife and daughter, abducting infected humans and experimenting on them in his underground laboratory in the frantic search for a cure.

Like many remakes of science fiction and horror movies, Lawrence's film updates the story's socio-political context, in this case by engaging with the *zeitgeist* of a traumatized America after 9/11. Accordingly, in another departure from the novel, the story is not set in Los Angeles but in New York, and memories of the terrorist attacks on the city are clearly evoked in the images of abandoned subway stations and deserted, rubble-filled streets. The film's Neville, who, as a military doctor, was involved in the failed attempt to evacuate the city at the outbreak of the plague and thus feels compelled to fix the situation, repeatedly refers to his house on Washington Square and to the city as a whole as his "Ground Zero," a place he cannot leave before repairing some of the damage humankind has inflicted upon itself. His increasingly manic state of mind and his loss of faith is contrasted with that of Anna, a Brazilian woman who has heard his radio message. Anna still firmly believes in God (the first thing we see of her is a crucifix dangling from her car's rearview mirror) and is convinced that divine guidance has brought her to Neville. Although he doubts the existence of a human colony in the woods of Vermont, Neville eventually – and somewhat unnecessarily – sacrifices himself in a kind of God-ordained suicide attack, killing the group of infected who have invaded his house. Before his death, he gives Anna a vial

containing the blood of a woman he has managed to cure. The final scene shows Anna and Ethan, a boy who is in her care, arriving at the colony, a small settlement secured behind high, impenetrable gates. The first thing that catches the viewer's eye when the doors of this "city upon a hill" open is a newly built church.¹¹

Lawrence's film is full of religious symbolism: Since the plague broke out around Christmas, Christmas trees and decorations are still up in the abandoned houses Neville visits to gather food and medicine. The survivors' colony is located in Bethel (House of God), Vermont, and the image of a butterfly, a symbol of Christ's resurrection, is used repeatedly in different variations throughout the film. *The Omega Man* equally transforms Robert Neville into a Christ-like martyr who literally gives his blood to save mankind. The last image of the film shows the dying Charlton Heston lying sprawled in a fountain in an obvious crucifixion pose, a spear in his side. In contrast, Matheson's novel is critical of religion and somewhat ironically explains the phenomenon of the crucifix as a vampire-repellent as a purely psychological mechanism: Fanatical Christians who have caught the disease react with shock and fear at the sight of the cross because they believe themselves to have become infernal demons.

Anna's closing voice-over in the 2007 film praises Neville's sacrifice, made for the sake of humankind, and, in retrospect, identifies the film the audience has just watched as a kind of tribute to him: "This is his legend." As should be obvious by now, this rephrasing of the title, so poignantly used as the closing line in Matheson's book, turns the novel's final message on its head. Despite its numerous hints that the infected have in fact not lost all of their human traits, the film still treats them as wholly malignant, aggressive monsters who deserve to be blown up in the final showdown so that the

¹¹ The phrase "city upon a hill," derived from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), has become famous through its use in John Winthrop's sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630), a key text of American Puritanism, which stresses the importance of setting an example of Godliness and severing all ties with the impure Church of England. Various US presidents have used this trope to describe America as a shining beacon of hope in the world.

'old race' can escape from New York to rebuild America, Puritan-style, in a walled-in rural settlement. Since all the inhabitants of the colony seem to be immune, Neville's serum presumably will be used to turn the 'monsters' back into well-adjusted humans.

The term 'vampire' is never used in the film. The infected are now called "Dark-Seekers," a name referring not just to their sensitivity to sunlight, but suggesting a deliberate preference for the 'dark side.' "Light up the darkness," a phrase attributed to Bob Marley, is the film's final line. Since it refers back to an earlier scene in which Neville was praising Marley as somebody who stood up against racism and discrimination and wanted to "inject" people with love and compassion for each other, the muddled ending seems to suggest that Anna, who (rather surprisingly) had never even heard of Marley, is quoting the line out of context. Who is the enemy? The traditional dichotomy of 'light' and 'dark' with all its metaphysical associations, reinforced but also often blurred in Gothic fiction, is used here without ever being questioned or developed in any meaningful way. In its 2007 incarnation, *I Am Legend* is thus no longer a perceptive analysis of humanity's incapability of refraining from structuring its world-view around ideas of the 'other,' of the workings of prejudice and the difficulty of accepting life-styles transgressing socially prescribed norms, but a call to arms, stressing the need to keep Them from taking over – at all costs.

Added to this is a conservative suspicion of new scientific breakthroughs. Neville's meaningless suicide mission seems to suggest that the original sin of science, which has turned the world over to the monsters, can only be redeemed by the almost ritualistic death of the only surviving scientist. Writing about the increasingly conservative politics of horror films in the 1980s, Robin Wood has observed that the more 'other' and irredeemably evil the monster and the clearer the dichotomy between 'light' and 'dark,' the more reactionary the film: "[H]orror films [...] are progressive precisely to the degree that they refuse to be satisfied with this simple designation – to the degree that, whether explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, they modify, question, challenge, and seek to invert it" (Wood 192). Since the infected in Lawrence's film are com-

puter-animated creatures reminiscent of monsters in a video game, it is almost impossible for the viewer to find in their distorted appearance traces of their lost humanity. They are unequivocally alien.

Intriguingly, this ending was not the one originally envisioned by the screenplay. The DVD special edition offers the chance to watch an alternative cut of the film with an ending that completely reverses the one chosen for the theatrical release. This conclusion to the film's plot, much closer to the final twist of Matheson's novel, was apparently not spectacular enough for test audiences. In this alternate ending, Neville, whose final promise to his daughter, "Daddy will make the monsters go away," has made him incapable of ever questioning the infected's apparently monstrous nature, finally realizes what the audience – in both film versions – has long suspected: The infected do, in fact, evolve. They have the emotional capacity to feel love and hate, they long for revenge and suffer loss and are intelligent enough to construct a trap with a fitting bait for Neville, tricking him with his own tools. In the theatrical version, these hints at the Dark-Seekers' 'cunning' are merely used to create suspense and make the audience anticipate the final attack on Neville's house. Yet, of course, it is Neville who, although he does not kill randomly like his prototype in Matheson's novel, has abducted, experimented on and killed many of the infected. He is the one searching them out, aggressively hunting them, and not vice versa. This final, unsettling realization is visually conveyed in the alternate cut by a close-up of the wall of photographs in Neville's laboratory showing dead Dark-Seekers, test objects who did not survive the procedure. In a crucial earlier scene, Neville is joined by Anna in his underground lab. While she still sees the human in the comatose female 'monster' Neville is experimenting on and refers to her as "she," Neville coldly and persistently uses the pronoun "it." One might think here of a parallel scene in Stoker's *Dracula* where the transformed Lucy is described by one of her former suitors as a "foul Thing" (Stoker 190).

The first hint – both in the theatrical and the alternative version – that the infected might not be the inhuman monsters Neville thinks they are is given when the character referred to as 'Alpha Male' in the credits witnesses the trapping and abduction of a female of his

'pack' and risks his life by sticking his head out into the sunlight to catch a glimpse of the aggressor. Neville later records his thoughts on the incident on video and the audience already feels that he is not quite getting it right: "An infected male exposed himself to sunlight today. Now, it's possible their decreased brain function or the growing scarcity of food is causing them to ignore their basic survival instincts. Social de-evolution appears complete. Typical human behavior is now entirely absent." In this recording, it is Neville who appears devoid of emotions and, of course, he is dead wrong in his assessment.

Like the city, the remaining humans have gone feral. Contrary to the film's undercurrent of an almost Victorian fear of de-evolution, its autumnal, often lush and beautiful images of a deserted New York suggest that the death or mutation of humankind has brought not just ruin but has effected an almost utopian move back to nature. Deer and lions run through the grass-grown streets of Manhattan, the noise and smog are gone. This return of wildlife to New York is presented not solely as threatening – the atmosphere is often positively pastoral. The infected humans, too, while designed to look grotesque and threatening, seem to resemble not walking corpses or suffering sick people but wild beasts who are quick and agile, roar like lions and, like them, live in family-like groups.

What the theatrical version leaves undeveloped by having the final confrontation between Neville and the Alpha Male end in a big blast of explosives with no communication between the parties having been achieved, the alternative ending makes perfectly clear: The infected have only followed Neville to his house to take back the female he has stolen from their midst. More importantly, this is revealed as not just the result of pack loyalty but as a case of individual, even romantic, love. Still trying to cope with the loss of his family, Neville is ironically unable to recognize the same feelings in his double, the infected Alpha Male, who goes out of his way to make Neville understand that abducting his kind and torturing them to death in the name of science (and a fixed notion of what is normal or healthy) is wrong. As the infected man stares at his doppelgänger through the plexiglass window which separates them, a potent im-

age of Gothic mirroring, one almost expects him to quote Dracula's somewhat enigmatic "Yes, I too can love" (Stoker 43). The alternative ending manages to establish trust and communication – via sign language – between Neville and the hunter who turns out to be the hunted. With the infected woman released from her artificial coma, the 'monstrous' couple is reunited, displaying clear signs of mutual affection. Neville has no reason to die a spectacular death, but moves out with Anna and Ethan into an unknowable future.

One might bemoan the fact that with the image of the loving monster, the loathsome, diseased 'other' of Matheson's novel as well as the militaristic new vampires are yet again romanticized. But the novel's message is still brought across, if not in quite the same devastating way. The alternative version of *I Am Legend* manages to fuse both Matheson's tale about the vicious circle of prejudice, including the final enlightenment of the 'hero,' and the romantic view of the vampire as the misunderstood outcast who, in the end, has more love to offer than the self-righteous vampire hunter who wished him destroyed. Neville's God-complex has reached its peak when he screams at the infected "I can save everyone!" The alternative version makes it quite clear that they do not want and do not need saving. Just as nature has taken back New York, it will give the infected a chance to evolve into a new hybrid species. We are entering the age of the vampire.

Works Cited

- Arata, Stephen D. "The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization". *Victorian Studies* 33 (1990): 621–645.
- Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. New York: HarperTeen, 2009.
- Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Collector's Edition. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.
- Dan Curtis' Dracula*. Dir. Dan Curtis. Mpi Home Video, 2002. DVD.
- Dawidziak, Mark. "Introduction Two: The Unfilmed Legend". *Bloodlines: Richard Matheson's 'Dracula,' 'I Am Legend,' and Other Vampire Stories*. By Richard Matheson. Ed. Mark Dawidziak. Colorado Springs, CO: Gauntlet Pr., 2006. 207–213.
- Dracula*. Dir. Tod Browning. Universal Studios, 2004. DVD.

- Dracula*. Dir. Terence Fisher. Warner Home Video, 2002. DVD.
- Edwards, Justin D. *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2002.
- Halberstam, Judith. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.
- I Am Legend*. Limited 2-Disc Special Edition. Dir. Francis Lawrence. Warner Home Video, 2008. DVD.
- Malchow, H. L. *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1996.
- Matheson, Richard. *I Am Legend*. London: Gollancz, 2001.
- Meteling, Arno. *Monster: Zu Körperlichkeit und Medialität im modernen Horrorfilm*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2006.
- Miller, Elizabeth. *Dracula: Sense and Nonsense*. Westcliff-on-Sea: Desert Island Books, 2000.
- Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*. Dir. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau. Image Entertainment, 2001. DVD.
- Night of the Living Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. KSM, 2007. DVD.
- The Omega Man*. Dir. Boris Sagal. Warner Home Video, 2003. DVD.
- Patterson, Kathy Davis. "Echoes of *Dracula*: Racial Politics and the Failure of Segregated Spaces in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*". *Journal of Dracula Studies* 7 (2005), 19–26. Web. 22 Oct. 2009.
- Pharr, Mary. "Vampiric Appetite in *I Am Legend*, *Salem's Lot*, and *The Hunger*". *The Blood Is the Life: Vampires in Literature*. Eds. Leonard G. Heldreth and Mary Pharr. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1999. 93–103.
- Polidori, John William. "The Vampyre". *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula*. Ed. Christopher Frayling. London: Faber and Faber, 1992. 108–125.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula: Authoritative Text, Context, Reviews and Reactions, Dramatic and Film Variations, Criticism*. Norton Critical Edition. Eds. Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal. New York: Norton, 1997.
- Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.