

Magyar cím:

A posztapokaliptikus New York urbánus tereinek filmes megjelenítései

Angol cím:

Projected Cataclysm: The Urban Landscape of Cinematic New York in the Post-Apocalyptic
Imagination

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INTRODUCTION

Arguably, post-apocalyptic fantasies have been an integral part of several cultural and historical narratives, establishing the dichotomy of creation and destruction. The ruined city, which is the initial screen for the immediate aftermath of the cataclysm, showcases the visual interaction of humanity and cataclysmic forces. In the collective imagination, the ruined site showcases a type of tourist attraction, which scholars of science fiction, including Vera Benczik, Max Page, Robert Yeates, and Cortland Rankin mention with the terms “Ruinenlust” or “ruin lust” (Rankin 13, Yeates 10, Benczik, “The city in ruins”), “disaster porn” (Page 2), or “dark tourism” (Yeates 3) in relation to the post-apocalyptic discourse. These terms capture the innate desire to witness the physical remnants of the apocalypse: according to Benczik, the sight of the ruin invokes conflicting feelings such as attraction, joy, and guilt (Benczik, “The city in ruins”).

On a more general note, it can be argued that the urban landscape in its post-apocalyptic visual representation has a dual function. First, it stands as a relic, a reminder of a time that has passed and may never return. Outside of post-apocalyptic narratives, this can be observed in the spectacle of the ruin or the gated exclusion zones that remain separated from the rest of world, e.g. the territory of Chernobyl. In this respect, the urban environment functions as a screen of the past, a tool for public remembrance. The social and cultural ramifications of the destruction and potential restoration/dismantling of the post-apocalyptic city are greatly enhanced in these narratives. Thus, I contend that the second function of the urban landscape in the post-apocalyptic environment lies in the implementation of reimagination. The aftermath of the apocalypse always contains the prospect of a new beginning: the changing environment is joined by the possibility to change the socioeconomic and cultural establishments that the environment used to incorporate.

Arguably, the power of cinema lies in its ability to render these imaginings tangible and thus offer a direct, in-your-face arena where visualized desires, fears, and anxieties meet the spectators’ pre-conceived notions. Discourses on cinema have often emphasized the role of landscape within the aspects of the *mise-en-scène*; however, it is especially relevant to post-apocalyptic motion pictures. As Evdokia Stefanopoulou contends, “narrative cinema not only tells stories by following a series of events, but it also offers a visual spectacle” (39). The cataclysm, either caused by human or natural forces, first and foremost manifests itself in its immediate environment. Post-apocalyptic films emphasize the role of the landscape, which represents a web of identity markers, creating a screen for the renegotiation of past, present, and future reference points.

As I will demonstrate later, the urban spaces of post-apocalyptic cinema are inherently interconnected with the human and nonhuman bodies that occupy them. This is especially true to the 2007 film, *I Am Legend*, which is arguably one of the first motion pictures to portray the ruined skyline of New York City after September 11, 2001. The connection of the corporeal and the urban regarding the trauma of the millennium—a topic thoroughly discussed by László Munteán—is especially relevant when we think about the pervasive layer of dust that covered the city in the immediate aftermath of the collapse. As Marita Sturken contends, the dust became a multifaceted and sensitive screen, containing the physical amalgam of constructional and human remains as well as the shattered pieces of personal belongings (Sturken, “The Aesthetics of Absence” 312). This connection is echoed in *I Am Legend* in multiple ways. 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 (Will Smith) finds himself after the mutation of the Krippin virus takes hold of the city. The urban landscape—the decaying body—, filled with 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.

Thus, I will analyze the film based on two criteria that, I believe, are inseparable in this discussion. The primary thematic framework I will apply to examine the urban space in its post-apocalyptic cinematic representation is the notion of the heterotopia. Formulated by Michel Foucault in his 1966 book *The Order of Things (Les mots es les choses)* and later in his 1967 university lecture entitled “Of Other Spaces” (“Des espaces autres”), heterotopias are characterized as “counter-emplacements”, existing places that concentrate and juxtapose other places and eras (17). These places, however, are “simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” within the heterotopic site (17). Heterotopias are more than relevant to the discourse on post-apocalyptic places; they constitute a screen where spatial and chronological relations appear as a collective experience. As James Berger notes, “the writer and reader must be at both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world and then paradoxically remembering the world as it was, as it is” (6). Therefore, heterotopias, which already constitute a special place in our everyday reality, gain an even greater role in representing the meeting ground of formerly incompatible places and eras. I argue that the post-apocalyptic urban landscape constitutes a heterotopia in toto, representing the liminal nature of previously marginal heterotopic sites in

its entirety. The set of characteristics contained in this landscape are characterized by metonymical relations and showcase the complex ways through which the marginal relates to previous and arising grand narratives.

Since I have stated that the urban site is interconnected with the bodies it surrounds—especially in the post-apocalyptic discourse—it is also crucial to investigate this relation based on the idea of posthumanism and monster studies. Arguably, the Other is in itself a grotesque battleground of opposing forces. In pre-apocalyptic narratives, the Other is most commonly a marginal entity in relation to the dominant ideological narrative. However, in the post-apocalyptic discourse, as the urban landscape transitions into the heterotopic state, its inhabitants also mirror this liminal, constantly shifting attitude. The Darkseekers of *I Am Legend*, ambiguous entities initially trapped between the binary of human and monstrous, embody the constant flux of previous and present spaces, projections, and narratives. 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.

CHAPTER ONE

HETEROTOPIC ENVIRONMENTS, HETEROTOPIC ENTITIES

1.1. Spaces that unsettle

Michel Foucault's notion of the heterotopia offers an intriguing thematic approach upon examining post-apocalyptic urban environments. The term originates in medical studies, referring to, as Hetherington writes, "parts of the body that are either out of place, missing, extra, or, like tumours, alien" (42). Foucault's works—*The Order of Things* and "Of Other Spaces"—utilize this very aspect of unusuality or spatial alienness to shed light on "counter-emplacements" (e.g. mental health institutions, prisons, gated communities) that physically exist within a society and showcase some degrees of subversion of the dominant social ordering (Foucault 17). The term 'exist' is crucial here: it is precisely this factor that differentiates heterotopias from utopias, the latter referring to emplacements that signify an utter subversion while at same time remaining imaginary. Thomas More's 'utopia', which demonstrates the blend of *eu-topia* (good place) and *ou-topia* (no-place) refers to this perfect nowhere (Hetherington viii). Heterotopias, then, are emplacements that offer a hyphenated state between these two endpoints, allowing for a slice of subversion in a physical environment that is governed by set ideals and narratives.

Foucault contextualizes his idea in the spatial shift of the twentieth century, arguing that spatiality has occupied the place of historicity and sociality in the present century. Phenomenologists such as Henri Lefebvre, Gaston Bachelard, or Michel de Certeau also pointed out this move towards a category outside of structuralist binaries. The process of decentering was also applied to space itself, which was discovered to be anything but homogenous, and viewed instead as a collection site of a myriad of forms and relations, existing in constant flux within said space. This is especially crucial regarding heterotopias, sites that simultaneously contain and subvert the dominant social order. In this regard, they can be viewed as grotesque emplacements in the Bakhtinian sense. The second world that the carnival establishes also gains its in part momentary, in part everlasting effect by creating a physical space where, in perpetual cyclicity, kings can be crowned and uncrowned, death can replace life and life can replace death. Later works, such as Edward Soja's or Homi Bhabha's theory on thirdspace also discuss alternate forms of space that allow for the coexistence of marginal and preeminent discourses, and thus create spaces of reimagination and renegotiation.

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault extends the notion of heterotopia to the field of language, arguing that heterotopias create both physical and mental spaces that allow us to question the gist of our semantics. He contends that heterotopias “desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences” (xix). Again, the juxtaposition of heterogeneous realities and understandings results in the renegotiation of the dominant discourse. As Hetherington argues,

Heterotopic relationships unsettle because they have the effect of making things appear out of place. The juxtaposition of the unusual creates a challenge to all settled representations; it challenges order and its sense of fixity and certainty. This process of similitude is revelatory, like a collage, it brings forward the out-of-place and offers it up as a basis for alternative perspectives and orderings, revealing what is hidden among the ruins: little fragments of past, forgotten lives, found objects, strange, unsettling novel things that have a poetic wonder about them. (50)

So how does this relate to the post-apocalyptic discourse? When the cataclysm occurs, nothing remains the same: the gradual historic, social, and cultural changes that would otherwise characterize pre-cataclysm societies happen in a concentrated manner and at an accelerated speed. This forces survivors—if there remain any—to enter a renegotiating phase of their individual and collective identity. The subjective process, however, cannot be separated from external sites, which are also physically and/or culturally impacted by the sudden transformation. Thus, I argue that the cityscape is a sufficient and rich indicator of what Hetherington calls the process of unsettling. It offers a highly multi-angled screen, a carrier of pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic projections, thereby contesting the validity of previous social establishments as well as the potential structure of the new establishment. As mentioned before, heterotopias also have the power to “dissolve our myths”. Indeed, the post-apocalyptic heterotopic city also offers a chance to initiate discussions about pre-existing narratives; however, it also allows the verbalization of taboos. According to Berger,

Post-apocalyptic discourses try to say what cannot be said (in a strict epistemological sense) and what must not be said (what is interdicted by ethical, religious, or other social sanctions). [...] Post-apocalyptic representation, like Kant’s sublime, often takes place at a site of conjunction between this “cannot” and “must not”—a site where language stops, both for reasons of internal logic and social prohibition. (14)

However, the process of vocalization and reexamination is always challenged. The effort to overcome past anxieties, narratives, and silences is immediately established by the post-

apocalyptic urban iconography in which each brick, each windowsill becomes a trajectory of public remembrance and future possibilities. These renewed environments inadvertently create transgressive characters as well who are faced with the task of meditating between spatial, chronological, private, and collective spheres.

1.2. Cities as bodies, bodies as cities

In his seminal essay, “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 (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 that of being the walker. This also invokes Foucault’s influential theory of the panoptic society, based on Jeremy Bentham’s invention of the Panopticon. 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 *I Am Legend*. Both Neville and the Darkseekers hide in ground-level spaces, and, unlike in alien invasion films, only expect 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, also suggests the fall of the collective body of humanity. As I will demonstrate in the coming chapter, *I Am Legend* illustrates this relation through its narrative and cinematography as well.

Previously, I have theorized the ways through which the post-apocalyptic city can be understood as a metaphoric body. This body, which has turned heterotopic in toto (i.e. the collection site of different and many times opposing spatial and chronological values), also demonstrates the reversal of power within the dominant–marginal binary. The previously autonomous body has turned passive, prone to invasion by natural, technological, and monstrous forces. The term ‘invasion’ will be important in the coming chapter as well. However, the reverse—i.e. the invasion of the organic body—can also be attested in many post-apocalyptic narratives. Therefore, to understand how post-apocalyptic urban heterotopias

extend to the bodies they contain, we must also look at the primary invasion, the central shift that questions the very basis of our selfhood after the cataclysm: posthumanism.

The concept of posthumanism entails a state that surpasses the humanist notions of autonomy, agency, and exceptionalism of mankind as a collective group and humans as individuals. As is the case with the term ‘postmodernism’, the suffix ‘post’ in ‘posthumanism’ does not suggest that we are after humanism; as Patricia MacCormack argues, posthumanism rather “interrogates the conditions of possibility of being and knowing the human while offering examples from all discourses of how there is always something more in the human that delimits its parameters and possibilities” (523). This type of decentering highlights the grand narrative of binaries, and offers an inclusive concept of the human, an entity that is now able to contain the technological, the natural, and the monstrous in one. MacCormack also suggests that in this framework, the human only exists as an ideal, an imaginary reference point to which the quality and quantity of deviation may be determined. This approach evokes the similarly relational manner through which heterotopias may be conceptualized:

A further principle of heterotopia, one that derives from their significance as representing through similitude, is that they only exist in relation, that is, they are established by their difference in a relationship between sites rather than their Otherness deriving from a site itself. (Hetherington 43)

In monstrous post-apocalyptic narratives, this idea is crucial. It is also important to consider that what has been considered Other or monstrous in the pre-apocalyptic environment, can transform into the new reference point in the aftermath of the apocalypse. As is the case with the city that is now dominated by the previously marginal—i.e. heterotopias—, the monstrous narratives of catastrophe can turn previously human entities into what MacCormack calls “nonmonstrous” therefore subscribing to the power shift characteristic of post-apocalyptic urban sites (522).

In posthumanist discourses, theoreticians such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Gary Wolfe and others have emphasized the interrelatedness of the human, the machine, and the natural world. According to Patrick Hayes, “to think the cyborg, Haraway suggests, is to unthink the opposition between nature and culture, such that the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other” (273). That is, the subject is now to be understood as a fragmented whole, a sum of particles that have been considered opposing beforehand. This, of course, also entails a different ethical approach towards these crossroads

that now form their own, individual spaces. Concerning the role of science fiction in this very process, Elana Gomel poses the following questions:

But what if the Other is a moral agent but with a morality different from mine? What if compassion backfires when my own intuitions provide no clues to the desires and needs of my interlocutor? How do we navigate in a world where forms of agency are as multiform as the biological configurations of posthuman bodies? Can SF show us not just “bodies and selves” but entire cultures and civilizations “otherwise”? (5)

Therefore, Gomel emphasizes the role of acknowledging new paradigms, rules by which the act of *knowing* the Other might be expressed instead of viewing it in a solely ontological manner. This point is also raised by MacCormack who contends that “rather than I ‘am’ a cyborg project or becoming—animal, monstrosity is an encounter” (524). Through this meeting ground, new ways of perception and behavior could form, which could also facilitate the process of dialogue, encouraging the discovery of each other’s heterotopic, multi-angled selves in the post-apocalyptic environment.

CHAPTER TWO

SPACE, REOCCUPIED: *I AM LEGEND* (2007)

2.1. The disappearance and reemergence of disaster following 9/11

September 11, 2001 shook the core of the American psyche like no other: until then, the cataclysmic fantasies that were depicted on screen had remained unrealized. Max Page summarizes this virtual doomsday-state with an illustrative metaphor: “our popular culture has been in dress rehearsal for the city’s destruction for decades” (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, “The Wall, the Screen, and the Image” 163). 9/11 has generated similar discourses—although from an even closer angle. The event during which the nation “has lost its innocence” (Sturken, “The Aesthetics of Absence” 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 its place. This tangible reminder of the traumatic event was sensitive and multilayered: not only did it contain the scatter of building materials and personal or business-related artifacts but the remains of the dead as well. Opened to the public in 2014, the 9/11 Memorial Museum, as Sturken notes, also houses unidentified human remains, which is still regarded as a deeply controversial issue (Sturken, “The 9/11 Memorial Museum” 484).

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 (209). As Benczik notes, although Hollywood productions slowly reincorporated the cityscape of New York back into disaster films, the urban landscape continued to be untouched (Benczik, “The city in ruins”). 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 through the screens of thousands. 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 the cultural products after the attack (McSweeney 4). Arguably, those post-9/11 films that finally reintroduced the trope of the exposed New York skyline contributed to the acts of collective, public commemoration. Not only do they portray the interwoven web of the political, cultural, and historical narratives but they also demonstrate the discursive ways of adhering to, challenging, and/or processing these traumas and contradictory accounts. In this chapter, I will analyze how the 2007 film *I Am Legend* presents these relations through the fractured cityscape. The post-apocalyptic urban heterotopia demonstrates the juxtaposition of the human and the posthuman, as well as the urban and the post-urban, which allows for the renegotiation of past traumas and future possibilities. However, the two alternative endings—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.

After September 11, the term ‘ground zero’ began to be used in reference to the attack on the World Trade Center. As Sturken 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-911 architectural discourse of New York City (Sturken, “The aesthetics of absence” 311). 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” (qtd. in McSweeney 169). This impossibility appeared as a wound on public imagination, although in an ambiguous way: the wound represented a ubiquitous and lasting symptom, one that may never heal—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 to adequately verbalize and portray the trauma: as Page explains, many criticized the culture of disaster films after September 11, accusing it of desensitizing public attitude towards real-life tragedies (207).

The ecological fears that characterized the social milieu of the 1970s and 80s appeared at an even greater amplitude 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 denominator of these cataclysmic fantasies is that they 1. emphasize the detrimental role of human involvement in the natural world and 2. highlight human weakness in the face of environmental forces. Hurricane Katrina, the 2005 catastrophe that affected New Orleans detrimentally 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 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 redefine 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, the genre of the zombie film experienced a noticeable return after the 2000s (158). The zombie, the human-turned-Other reinforces the monster type that Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock calls the “invisible monster”: films such as *I Am Legend* showcase infected non-humans whose body has been “invaded” by a mutated virus (368). The trope of invisible corporeal invasion appears in recent works as well, including the post-apocalyptic video game and series, *The Last of Us*.

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—and 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 (starring Will Smith) who is depicted as the only human survivor of the detrimental Krippin epidemic. After the cure for cancer, an artificially manipulated measles virus mutates and wipes out most of the population, only Neville and the Darkseekers—mutated zombie-like, vampiric creatures—remain. Neville is immune to the virus and is forced to hide in the confines of his Manhattan apartment with Sam, his German Shepherd dog. He spends his days hunting for deer, gathering supplies from deserted stores, and, most importantly, experimenting on rats and captured Darkseekers to find the 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.

2.2. *The Corporeal City: “This is Ground Zero. This is my site.”*¹

The post-apocalyptic heterotopia in *I Am Legend* is represented in two aspects. First, the film provides an ecocritical, post-urban landscape which concentrates the juxtaposition of the urban and the natural site. The vacant city echoes the image of the dead zone, a site which now occupies the whole cityscape. In urban studies, as Gil Doron contends, dead zones are commonly located on the fringes of the city (206). However, as he argues, these badlands have never been entirely empty or dead; historically, they have been occupied by marginalized communities and have presented their own unique cultural features (204). The dead zone, as a heterotopic space, involves the element of the Other: it is constructed by spatial juxtaposition, retaining some aspects of the dominant social order yet also containing those characteristics that defy these norms.

As a heterotopic Other, the urban landscape is now defined by the inclusion of its marginalized counter-site in the post-apocalyptic environment. Symbolically, it is also a marginalized individual who represents the last remaining human inhabitant of the dead zone, portrayed by the character of Robert Neville. Again, it is crucial to note Kevin Hetherington’s point on the heterotopic site: that is, heterotopias are not simply the spaces themselves but the relations they allow to be juxtaposed in a heterogenous way (Hetherington 49). The post-apocalyptic urban space and particularly the dead zone—now extending to the entirety of New York City—can be viewed heterotopic precisely by this strong web of relations. Projections of the past, present, and future coexist in a rhizomatic pattern, allowed to be observed as one multi-angled, fluctuating screen.

Again, it is important to add that the word ‘dead’ in the term ‘dead zone’ does not imply that the area is empty or lifeless. On the contrary:

These places also present history (rather than represent it), foster creativity and nourish the aesthetics of ruins; they are a habitat for wildlife and plants, places in which the body has to adapt to its environment rather than being cuddly choked by its surroundings. In short, these zones are a space of suspension, of solitude and silence within the bustling cities, sites that are a viable alternative to the heterotopian public space. (Doron 204)

Doron continues by contending that the site of the dead zone represents a piece of living history with its unrestored architectural ruins (209). These ruins are often reclaimed by nature, and are therefore constantly shaped, altered, left to marvel upon, and incorporated in the community

¹ See *I Am Legend* 14:18.

life. The “invasion” by nature is rather celebrated than despised, 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, which lies surrendered without its previous inhabitants. The second aspect through which the urban landscape of *I Am Legend* presents its heterotopic qualities connects the invasion theme to the relation between the city and the body. As mentioned before, the film’s post-apocalyptic sites challenge the notion of the human through the connection of the corporeal and the architectural. The monstrous Darkseekers and their dark, desolate hiding places represent the survival of past traumas, which include diegetic as well as extradiegetic elements. László Munteán cites Gail Weiss’ account on 9/11 who uses the term “urban flesh” to express the metaphoric relation 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 (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 suggests 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” (4). In *I Am Legend*, the uncanny environment is paired with its uncanny monstrous, further emphasizing the partly familiar and partly unfamiliar character of the post-apocalyptic urban heterotopia where sites of remembrance and future possibilities coexist in an intricate hub.

The previously discussed intertwined relationship between the corporeal and the architectural is a noticeable allegory in the film from the beginning. The opening depicts a pre-apocalyptic television interview featuring Dr. Krippin (starring Emma Thompson), the chief virologist responsible for the treatment for 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” (01:30). As Stefanopoulou 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” (43). The high-angle shots—both static and mobile—initiate the viewer into the wholly transformed urban landscape: the city (like the decadent corpse depicted by Charles Baudelaire’s “Une Charogne”) 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 heterotopic dead zone 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 towards 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 city-turned-heterotopia forces Neville, the last (hu)man of the city to revise his position both as a city dweller and a human.

2.3. With us, against us, or somewhere in between

According to MacCormack, “monsters in themselves are created through a bordering and create bordering encounters” (532). The monster, especially if it is a hybrid entity, exists through liminality. It 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 qtd. in Weinstock 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. This in-between state produces heterotopic landscapes that mirror the monstrous. As the virus invades the body, its environmental materialization also 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 appears as an immediate threat. This threat is twofold: according to Weinstock, infection films portray monsters that either pose a danger in the form of death or in “monstrous transformation” (368). In *I Am Legend*, the Darkseekers represent both.

I previously suggested that post-apocalyptic urban heterotopias are characterized by the extension of formerly marginal sites. I also added that in *I Am Legend*, this aspect is emphasized by the theme of invasion. However, 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 non-urban—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 coexistence, 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 (“I Am Legend 2”).

As McSweeney contends, the haunting presence of 9/11 is a palpable extradiegetic element in Neville’s world (170). McSweeney cites Michael Bell’s theory of the “ghosts of place” that expresses the presence of memories, traumas, and allusions as inseparable from their environment (171). 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 Washington Bridge, signifying that there are still bridges to be crossed rather than burned.

CONCLUSION

The post-apocalyptic urban landscape is subversive, transgressive, and dense with opposing iconographies. I believe that the framework I have applied to the examination of the cinematic renderings of post-apocalyptic New York City captures the complex structure of these renewed spaces. In pre-cataclysmic cities, the notion of the heterotopia denotes emplacements that, in their grotesque, carnivalesque essence, represent a third type of spatiality, one that allows for and celebrates the presence of marginality within the dominant social ordering. However, in post-apocalyptic narratives, when historicity, sociality, and spatiality cease to remain the same, the city becomes an enlarged heterotopia. The anxieties that have framed pre-apocalyptic fantasies suddenly emerge to the surface and present themselves to the survivors through their own, man-made architecture.

Why New York City? As Page contends, “to destroy New York is to strike symbolically at the heart of the United States” (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 metaphoric narrative and visual subject of disaster films in the second half of the 2000s. The heterotopic 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 metaphoric relation between the architectural and the corporeal. The heterotopic values are presented in both aspects, suggesting that the post-apocalyptic environment also creates heterotopic subjects who are forced to find their place in the transformed microcosm.

Questions of selfhood, however, also test the former notions of human existence by the emergence of posthuman entities. The heterotopic body of the Darkseekers represents 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 towards humanity’s/non-humanity’s/in-between-humanity’s relation to itself, others, and its immediate environment.

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