ZOMBIFICATION VERSUS REIFICATION AT THE END OF THE WORLD:
EXPLORING THE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN VIA THE POSTHUMAN ZOMBIE IN
CONTEMPORARY HORROR FILM

by

Kelly Ann Doyle

M.A., Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2007
B.A. (Hons), Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2005

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Interdisciplinary Studies)
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Okanagan)

September 2015

© Kelly Ann Doyle 2015
Abstract
The zombie figure is ubiquitous in contemporary horror film—particularly in the United States—and has prompted me to explore why zombie films have regained popularity post-9/11, why the zombie has become a figure in flux, evolving from slow to fast, from un-dead to living, and from decaying to mutating body, and finally, to explore the practical use of an allegory of the zombie at the end of the world. My fascination with horror film has bloomed into an analysis of the ways in which the zombie figure in film troubles and in part reifies the human figure delineated by classical humanism and anthropocentrism; how posthumanism serves as a critical lens through which the zombie figure not only threatens ontology, but also the ideological constructs of speciesism, racism, and sexism that depend upon the fantasy figure of the human to justify dehumanization and atrocities. Zombie films’ apocalyptic narratives warn of ecological crisis, of over-consumption, of ends that are always near yet always deferred. They are intertextual, historically and politically resonant, and draw particularly though not singularly on America-centric fear and trauma. It is particularly significant as a genre when one considers the 9/11 attacks as a benchmark. Extant criticism has focused on examining the political and cultural critiques of American society in George A. Romero’s canonical films, and others, to conclude that “they” are “us”. Moreover, it often suggests that zombies provide a background against which humans reach their full potential—re-endorsing humanism and anthropocentrism—or alternatively, they highlight essential flaws and the aggressive, ‘animalistic’ nature of humans. By contrast, I argue that these films do more than mediate terror; they profoundly affect political life since 9/11 by insisting that posthumanism must be addressed if we are to understand the ways in which the human subject is mapped and remapped by such events.
Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Kelly Doyle.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii  
Preface ............................................................................................................................................... iii  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................. iv  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................... vi  
Dedication .......................................................................................................................................... viii  
Chapter 1 Introduction: Rising Dead, Falling Towers, Posthuman Nightmares ...................... 1  
Chapter 2 “They” are “us”, but Who or What are We? The Limits of the Human, Deceptive Realism, and Zombification by Moving Image in George A. Romero’s *Diary of the Dead* ................................................................................................................................. 35  
  
- Romero’s Dead Films and their Sociopolitical Concerns: Critical Overview .................. 40  
- “The Camera Sees, and What the Camera Sees the Audience Sees”: Media as Meaning-Maker ........................................................................................................................................ 51  
- The Zombifying, Dehumanizing Eye of the Camera ......................................................... 59  
- Dr. Maxwell: Last Stand of the Human Subject ...................................................................... 70  
- “Are We Worth Saving?”: Final Footage, Finite Humans .................................................. 79  
Chapter 3 The War on Zombies: Ecological Crisis, Human Hierarchy and American Exceptionalism in *World War Z* .............................................................................................................. 86  
  
- Ecological Crisis in WWZ ........................................................................................................... 90  
- Ecological Abandonment, Human Exceptionalism ............................................................ 98  
- The View from America: Reifying the Human Subject in WWZ ...................................... 108  
- In Defense of Security, Militarism, and Totalitarianism: The “Salvation Gates” of Jerusalem ..................................................................................................................................... 119  
Chapter 4 Corporate Maleficence, the Posthuman, and the End of the World in the *Resident Evil* Film Franchise ................................................................................................................................. 130  
  
- Stumbling, Running, Tunneling Forward: *Resident Evil* Zombie Evolution and Posthumanism .................................................................................................................................. 139  
- Under the Umbrella of Humanism: Undermining Umbrella’s Human Subject .......... 153  
- Race, and Resistance to Umbrella’s Anthropocentrism and Speciesism ...................... 162  
- “They did something to me. I barely feel human anymore”: Alice in Posthuman Wonderland ................................................................................................................................. 168  
- “My Name is Alice, and this is my World”: Last Stand on a Charnel Ground ............. 176  
Chapter 5 All the Rage: Broken Speed Limits and Broken Ontological Boundaries in *28 Days Later* ................................................................................................................................................. 187
I Ran With a Zombie: Speed, Fear, and Leaving Slow Zombies in the Dust ............... 191
Global Pandemic in 28 Days: Viral Rage and “Real-Life” Resonance ....................... 209
Imperialism, Speed, and Humanism ........................................................................ 219
“There is no Infection”: Rage, Survival, and the Un?-infected .............................. 224
The Elephant in the Room: Humanized Animals, Animalized Humans .................. 234
Hopeful Hopelessness and Uneasy Endings .............................................................. 241
Chapter 6 Conclusion: Vexed Eschatologies ............................................................ 246
  Coming Full Circle: Apocalyptic Un-Veiling and the Terror of
  Dehumanization ........................................................................................................ 262
  A Look to Future Ends .............................................................................................. 272
Works Cited .................................................................................................................. 279
Acknowledgements

I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to research and explore what began as a childhood interest and hobby, and to have had the encouragement and support of family, friends, and colleagues. I am grateful for those who tirelessly read this thesis in its various incarnations, and who offered their support, time, expertise, and energy to make thoughtful and invariably helpful comments: thanks are due especially to my supervisor, Dr. Jodey Castricano, for seeing the potential in me and in this project from the first email I sent her as a prospective student back in 2008, but also for her guidance, critical feedback, and provocative questions on every page of my work and in meetings, and her encouragement at every stage of my PhD. Thanks to my committee members, Dr. Daniel Keyes and Dr. George Grinnell, who were always available to discuss the work and its progression and who thoroughly and thoughtfully read this thesis and offered comments, suggestions, and critical insights that allowed me to approach it with new eyes and to introduce more nuance and complexity to the work. Thanks to Dr. Francisco Pena, who suggested helpful texts on apocalyptic rhetoric and whose knowledge on the apocalyptic was instrumental in inspiring my conclusion. Looking back at my time at Memorial University, I would like to thank Dr. Faith Balisch for telling me in my first year that literary studies was where I excelled, and Dr. Noreen Golfman for her advice, her support, and for admitting me into her full third-year Film Studies class, which gave me a foundation on which to build my interest in film scholarship. To Dr. Danine Farquharson, I am grateful for the class that made me ask the questions and see the connections that allowed me to dream the idea for this dissertation into existence. I would also like to thank the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies at UBC Okanagan for their support via University Graduate Fellowships, which allowed me to focus on the completion of this project, and most recently for awarding me with a FCCS Dean’s
Scholarship in the eleventh hour; this extra support at the final stages of my revision process was critical. Research preparation for this work was facilitated by a Graduate Student Travel Grant from UBC Okanagan’s Internal Grants program, which allowed me to present my work on a dissertation chapter and receive invaluable feedback from experts in the field at the International Gothic Association’s Biennial Conference, “Gothic Limits, Gothic Ltd.” In Heidelberg in 2011. Thanks are due as well to Okanagan College, which provided generous funding that allowed me to present yet another dissertation-based paper at the International Gothic Association’s conference, “Gothic Technologies, Gothic Techniques” in Surrey, United Kingdom in 2013. I would also like to thank Arda, who witnessed my highest and lowest moments in the writing process and offered to help in any way he could, who let me talk out my ideas in a field that was completely foreign to him, offered encouragement, support, and enthusiasm, and indulged my love of horror by watching some of the primary films for this thesis with me despite his general dislike of horror film. Finally, to my parents, who have encouraged my academic development and sacrificed much to offer support, both personal and financial, as well as love and strength over the years when things were at their hardest and their most productive by turns: this project would never have come to fruition without you.
Dedication

For all the horror lovers, especially the female ones, who have ever tried to articulate why the genre is so compelling to people who don’t seem to understand.

Most importantly, for my parents, Rick and Debbie Doyle, who introduced me to stories and storytellers that catalyzed my hunger for words and narratives, who let me watch horror films over and over as a child, and in so doing, paved the way for me to personally and professionally cultivate my interest in nightmares both real and imagined.
Chapter 1 Introduction: Rising Dead, Falling Towers, Posthuman Nightmares

“There’s something I want to show you, something I want you to touch. It’s in a room not far from here—in fact, it’s almost as close as the next page. Shall we go?”

–Stephen King, Night Shift, 1977

From 2001 to 2015, the zombie figure has become emblematic of fears situated firmly in the 21st century. Especially for those films produced in America, 9/11 can be understood as a benchmark for the new wave of films in this time period. Of course, this is not the only period of time in which zombie films have resonated in culture; nor is it the only geographical space.¹ That said, the increase in zombie films produced in America, or at least focused on America as a diegetic space since 9/11 makes the event a worthwhile starting point because it is clear that the genre receives renewed attention in the wake of such a powerful, and powerfully uncertain, wound within US culture. Scholars have long established the radical power of horror films between the 1950s to the 1980s to address American social and global anxieties.² Many of the films from the 1950s are considered reactionary, their science-fiction and alien invasion narratives steeped in Cold War conservatism, the movement from European, mythic and Gothic monsters of 1930s and 1940s horror film to the modern shores of America³, the impotence of scientific experts, the

¹ Zombie films entered the cultural imaginary in 1932 with the Halperin brother’s White Zombie and persisted, even as a niche genre, as titles such as The Plague of the Zombies (1966) and many others were released. Geographically speaking, White Zombie was set not in America, but in Haiti, and zombies have made their way into the film culture and setting of Spain (Rec (2007)), New Zealand (Black Sheep (2006)); Braindead (1992)); Norway (Dead Snow (2009); and of course, Italy: Lucio Fulci’s Zombie (1979) gave him a degree of notoriety and helped him break into the international market. Delving into the international archive of zombie films is beyond the scope of this project.
³ Joseph Maddrey argues in “Bad Kids, Big Bugs, Body Snatchers and the Bomb” that the monsters of the 1930s and 1940s are from an “old world order” that is subject to isolationist rejection (31).
perils of nuclear radiation, and critiques of Fordism and McCarthyism. Horror films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including George A. Romero’s zombie classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), are lauded for their unflinching exploration into the disintegration of American society and traditional, conservative values.

After the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, zombie films have become not merely popular but ubiquitous in American culture and with this in mind, I consider 9/11 a threshold date for the filmic zombie archive, one that necessarily colours any reading of horror and the zombie itself by shifting the focus of national fear. For instance, the religious terrorist and terrorist forces in millennial films have replaced the secular communist threat of the 1950s and 1960s as a source of fear and alterity, while concerns about radiation and nuclear warfare are succeeded and built upon by the threat of bioweaponry. Moreover, the thematic pre-occupation of America under attack on its own soil and confronted with the allegorical end of military and medical reliability, American values in general, and the world as they know it, is visible in the zombie films of the late 1960s and 1970s through to the contemporary films in the 2000s. This is to say that 9/11 might be a pivotal point at which zombie films resonate strongly, but it is not the only one, and it does not mark some new terror. David Altheide contends that “the ‘crisis’ of the 9/11 attacks was artfully constructed through news accounts as the ‘world has changed’” (“Fear, Terrorism, and Popular Culture” 11), but in fact, very little has changed. The social and political anxieties from the 1950s to 2001 that I mentioned may change form, but their pre-occupations are the same. In other words, what is significant about 9/11 is that it marks a time of terror in which familiar

---

4 See Mark Jancovitch’s *Rational Fears: American Horror Films in the 1950s* for a thorough and fascinating study on this period of horror.
questions about “us” versus “them” resonate along the fault lines of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. This is especially true when the lives of U.S. nationals are considered by the United States to be more valuable than other lives—particularly, but not limited to, the lives of people in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib—which are all differentiated from Americans based on religious and racial grounds. In the wake of 9/11, as Marc Redfield notes, the “abjected figure of the ‘terrorist’ in the U.S.-dominated late-twentieth century world order” emerged (“Introduction: Spectral Life and the Rhetoric of Terror” 2). The moniker “terrorist” here can be read in part as an invocation of an unknowable, faceless, and sub-human or in-human enemy pushing on the borders of America from within and without, and against which a “War on Terror” was justified. Moreover, those people detained and “often casually or mistakenly seized” (9) during torture scandals served, as David Simpson observes, as stand-ins for “undiscovered figures of terror” (qtd. in Redfield 9) that cannot be named, found, or stopped. In a time of terror, then, in the context of anthropocentrism the “us” versus “them” rhetoric of 9/11 and the “War on Terror” draws attention to how some groups or individuals are animalized and subjected to extreme cruelty as part of a political agenda. At the heart of 9/11 and zombie films produced in its wake, there is an abiding anxiety about anthropocentric beliefs that the human is the most significant species on the planet with a higher value or moral status than other species, particularly when political definitions of what constitutes being ‘human’ allows for continued and systemic racism, sexism, and speciesism. The concerns of zombie films form a complex interplay amongst historical references, cultural anxiety, and oft-repeated horror conventions.

5 See Richard Devetak, “The Gothic Scene of International Relations: Ghosts, Monsters, Terror, and the Sublime after September 11,” for a thorough analysis of how the “War on Terror” was framed as a war against a shadowy enemy threatening U.S. national security.
that stress their intertextuality. More significantly, this complexity draws attention to the repetitive way in which anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism manifest themselves in damaging and unsustainable ways, often exacerbating the zombie apocalypse in the process.

Particular fears about anthropocentrism and other fears in zombie films are not new in and of themselves, rather that they are newly reflected and theorized, explored, and nuanced in films produced and released after 9/11. Rather than form a continuum—a chronological canon of zombie films that trace an uncomplicated evolution of the zombie figure and which effaces the political and cultural investments of past films in order to replace them with new ones—what emerges is a Möbius Strip rather than a linear progression with discernable edges and orientations. 6 Traversing or reading the archive as a Möbius Strip means traveling both inside and outside—of representations of the human subject, of historical references, and of US pre-occupations—without ever crossing an edge; there is no before or after, and no determining the beginning or the end. At the present moment, the United States is still haunted by the spectre of 9/11 and the Twin Towers, by terrorism, by anxiety over ill-prepared defenses for unexpected attack, as well as by potential pandemic and contagious diseases. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, several U.S. senators and various media outlets received letters containing Anthrax, causing “five deaths and some 17 illnesses” and prompting anxiety about if and when larger scale terrorist attacks might follow (Franz 504). Fears about attack, disease and pandemic in and of themselves are not located before or after 9/11; they do not simply fade as much as they recycle and refresh anew. They certainly do not end. To be clear, I am not claiming that insofar as zombie films are about fear they

6 A surface with only one side and one boundary component, with the mathematical property of being non-orientable.
simply represent whatever fear is present at the time. To do so would be to claim that zombie films do not make political statements, or that culture happens to provide the zombie figures for a cultural anxiety that is present. Rather, I would suggest that films cannot help but mediate the wider implications of the figures in them, even if political critique is not the motivating factor for making zombie films. In other words, at the heart of horrific and apocalyptic zombie films in which zombies—and those who are becoming zombies—are defined as others and destroyed is a critique of anthropocentrism: an ideology that positions the human figure against all its “others” and legitimates the heinous treatment of those others based on their supposed inferiority or potential for threat. For example, 9/11 was an event that called for the re-drawing of lines between insider and outsider, terrorist and non-terrorist in problematically definitive ways, and contemporary zombie films explore how changing articulations of the limits of the human come to mean ongoing exclusion of and violence against those defined outside those limits.

While many zombie films post-9/11—including the selections this dissertation will examine in detail—are deadly serious, increasingly invested in violence, speed, mutation, and bleak, ambiguous, and un-resolved endings, I do not want to place un-necessary emphasis on the prefix pre- or post- 9/11 as a way of dividing films easily into “before” and “after” the event, or to situate the films in the archive in opposition to one another. Zombie films released after 2001 in America are, as I will show, undoubtedly triggered by 9/11 but never by this alone, and as I will also argue, some of their most powerful insights do not always address matters explicitly or popularly associated with political terror, such as the ideological biases invested in anthropocentrism as the only ontologically authentic version of the human subject. That said, zombie films are nonetheless at the heart of effectively shifting
how we think about terror and those subject to it in that they theorize the fragility of the human subject, which we are increasingly unable to ignore in the face of growing ecological awareness, species interconnectivity, and the way in which the figure of the human has been used to justify ongoing inequality, abuse, and exploitation. In other words, the crisis of the terrorist as cultural other that is triggered by 9/11 triggers a number of other crises for women, racial, and animal others. I focus on post 9/11 films that are non-exhaustive, but indicative of the allegorical and politically invested trends in the sub-genre that revolve around the ontological fragility of what Cary Wolfe terms “the fantasy figure called the human”—a “Cartesian ideal” that writes the human as an enduring subject—against which non-human beings are defined not in terms of subjectivity or diversity, but as incomplete life forms that are “crippled” versions of the human in the context of Western ideology (“Language, Representation, and Species” 45). In these terms, it becomes impossible to discuss the human without considering the institution of “speciesism” that supports anthropocentrism and which has been linked to racism and sexism by scholars such as Marjorie Spiegel, who draws disturbing parallels between African-American slavery and the exploitation of non-human animals in *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*. Speciesism, a term coined by British Psychologist Richard Ryder, is “the belief in the inherent superiority of one species over others” (Moore 12). In Ryder’s words, “It was like racism or sexism—a prejudice based upon morally irrelevant physical differences. Since Darwin we have known we are human animals related to all the other animals through evolution; how, then, can we justify our almost total oppression of all the other species?” (Ryder “All Beings that Feel Pain Deserve Human Rights”). The answer seems to be that there is a biased investment in a fantasy of human ontology that serious scholarship takes as a
given and which finds expression in the way the world is mediated. This is to say that speciesism has serious implications as a term that extends to non-human beings and beyond. As Wolfe explains, the

humanist concept of subjectivity is inseparable from the discourse and institution of speciesism, which relies on the tacit acceptance—and nowhere more clearly (as Slavoj Žižek has noted) than in Ferry’s beloved Kant—that the full transcendence of the ‘human’ requires the sacrifice of the ‘animal’ and the animalistic, which in turn makes possible a symbolic economy in which we can engage in a ‘noncriminal putting to death’ (as Derrida puts it) not only of animals, but other humans as well by marking them as animal.” (“Old Orders for New” 43)

My zombie film archive’s attention to the figure of the human reveals the ideological biases of speciesism, and by extension, the racism and sexism that are at the heart of Western anthropocentrism. The archive also seeks to acknowledge that this figure is experiencing its own apocalypse, or as Timothy Morton might put it, the human figure finds itself on a charnel ground, a symbolic place where the human is surrounded by ecological devastation and other living beings whose suffering—in large part because of anthropocentrism—should no longer be ignored. In other words, what these films demonstrate so powerfully is that anthropocentrism, which has been taken for granted as a truism for too long, is both insufficient and unsustainable in a way that is becoming increasingly visible and more difficult to deny. By dramatizing the extinction of humans, the zombie apocalypse in these films disrupts an anthropocentric investment in the idea that humans are guaranteed species survival by virtue of self-appointed superiority over other life forms. Indeed, it suggests that
humans are not at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of being since such a hierarchy does not actually exist. Further, these films make visible the violent speciesist, racist, and sexist practices committed by some self-appointed humans against those they define as lesser beings, which is particularly disturbing when their reasons for these practices are tenuous, just as such reasons are in the world beyond film.

As a vehicle for thinking through the limits of anthropocentrism and the human figure, the zombie apocalypse offers a nuanced and complex ground for analysis and for recognizing the charnel house that Morton suggests we inhabit. Too often, current scholarship in the field comes up short by claiming, as Kyle Bishop has in the past, that “the horror of the zombie movie comes from recognizing the human in the monster” (“Raising the Dead” 201), or vice versa. The result is a conflation of the “human” and the “zombie,” an implication in the literature on zombies in particular that the human is actually monstrous, and a subsequent totalizing rhetorical move to claim that “they” are actually “us.” While a necessary starting point, this approach to the zombie is reductive and problematic in and of itself, in part because it still depends on defining the human in absolute terms as a cornerstone for analysis; as a starting position against which zombies can be defined and understood, or provide some insight and understanding to the figure of the human in zombie narratives. In various incarnations, other scholars in the field arrive again and again at the basic conclusion that zombies are us without adequately considering how we define “us.”7 That is to say, there is a bias in the scholarship that already assumes an anthropocentric approach. Remarkably, this is even true of scholars supposedly writing in the spirit of

---

posthumanist interrogations of zombie cinema. In a recent anthology called *Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, numerous contributors with otherwise engaging analyses fall into the trap of using the zombie to reify the human by contrast.\(^8\) For instance, writing on Max Brook’s novel *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, Margo Collins and Elson Bond claim that the victorious survivors have become more fully human for their experience.

In accordance with current scholarship about zombies, Sarah J. Lauro and Karen Embry point out in “A Zombie Manifesto” that the zombie’s inability to speak, think and reason not only demonstrates how the human is defined by cognizance but also recalls Rene Descartes’ view regarding non-humans.\(^9\) I would add that this same logic has historically facilitated the indiscriminate use of non-human animals for human gain, not to mention those racialized groups considered “sub-human.” To be sure though, as Lauro and Embry go on to examine, the zombie is an ontologically complex figure—the article is inspired by Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto”—and they draw attention to the inability to rely on the zombie as an ontological determinant when “the zombie’s irreconcilable body (both living and dead) raises the insufficiency of the dialectical model (subject/object)” (87). Lauro and Embry posit that the only way to become posthuman is to become antisubject, a state of being that the zombie occupies as a liminal figure that resists being a subject or an object (87). Their concept of the posthuman zombie resonates with my own in this sense, but although they read the zombie both with and against humanist philosophy and

\(^8\) I mention them here for context, but greater detail can be found predominantly in Chapter 4 but also in Chapter 2.

\(^9\) Descartes held that animals, unlike humans, lacked the capacity for intelligence, reason, and language, as well as the ability to have souls. For Descartes, animals were automata; machines to which humans owed no moral consideration since animals ostensibly lack minds, reason, and language. See “Animals are Machines,” 281-285.
psychoanalysis, and while they discuss the figure’s historical significance as a boundary-setter and read the zombie in a Marxist framework of power, colonialism, and industry, they problematically conclude that ultimately they have “defined humanity” and “suggest[ed] what a true ‘posthuman’ would look like” (91). However, as I will point out in more detail shortly in this chapter, posthumanism is a complex, multivalent term that has been understood in a number of ways. Lauro and Embry’s strides towards a reading of the zombie as posthuman are considerable, and yet, in claiming to have defined the human and to have determined a true posthuman, they wander back towards the reification of the subject they are so adamant to destabilize. For instance, they claim that the zombie narrative asks us to consider what is more terrifying: an ultimate separation from our fellow humans, or the dystopic fantasy of a swarm organism (101). The former suggests that there is a default human subject one can be separated from, while the latter assumes that the loss of consciousness that supposedly defines individualism and the human is frightening because it makes the subject less than human. Moreover, towards the end of their essay as they briefly discuss 28 Days Later, they observe, as Bishop articulates, that humans are “more monstrous than the zombies” (107). I want to push their logic further: to use the zombie’s ontological instability to avoid reifying “the human” as an ideal that is apolitical and ahistorical. Moreover, I want to reframe Bishop’s claim that the human is in the monster to build on Lauro and Embry’s posthumanist approach that recognizes the insufficiency of a dialectical model. That is, the zombie figure—somewhere between life and death—is the allegorical embodiment of the idea that there is not an either/or scenario for the human versus the monster or for that matter, the human versus the non-human. In the figure of the zombie, the physical body of the human stubbornly asserts itself, moving forward in a state of un-death
even as, zombified, it begins to fail. The visage and form of the human is at the core of the zombie figure and so in some ways the idea of the human persists. The human might not cease to be in these terms, but neither can it carry on as an unchanging, untroubled ontological ideal.

A critical approach that stresses dichotomy is of increasingly little use moving forward, but posthumanist theory can help carve out the limitations of the human figure to focus on what it might become in the films I have chosen for analysis. Posthumanism, to be sure, is a concept that has been and continues to be defined in ways that are sometimes contradictory and irreconcilable.\textsuperscript{10} Wolfe traces one genealogy of the term to the Macy conferences on cybernetics, which facilitated the development of a theoretical model for mechanical, biological, and communicational processes. This model removed the figure of the human and \textit{Homo Sapiens} from a particular privileged position in terms of meaning, cognition, and information (“Introduction: What is Posthumanism?” xii). Similarly, in the work of other prominent scholars such as Haraway and Elaine Graham, the posthuman is represented in terms of Science-Fiction themes of the cyborg, or the hybridity that emerges when prosthetics and technological innovations allow the human to be modified and thus ontologically destabilized insofar as understandings of the human as able-bodied or purely organic, for instance, are called into question. Some of these understandings of posthumanism make their way into this project, but my sense of the posthuman is not that we have somehow moved beyond the human—such a thing, as Braidotti points out, cannot be done. In the work of Braidotti and Morton, posthumanism engages the problem of

\textsuperscript{10} Wolfe details many of these conflicting views in the scholarship in his Introduction to \textit{What is Posthumanism?}
anthropocentrism and speciesism by exploring the end of the world and the end of the Anthropocene Age. Looking historically and culturally at humanism and anthropocentrism in zombie films based on their framework, I am thinking of posthumanism in the sense of recognizing the figure of the human as part of a cultural and historical moment that recognizes that rather than ending, the subject is a work always in progress, and the posthuman is always yet to come. In this sense, the speciesism, sexism, racism, and ecological devastation that is a byproduct of anthropocentrism is still present, but in the context of posthumanism it becomes clear that these ideological biases cannot hold. In order to explore the limits of the human in zombie films, I will examine the following films in the following order: George Romero’s *Diary of the Dead* (2008) in Chapter 2, Marc Forster’s *World War Z* (2013) in Chapter 3; Paul W.S. Anderson’s *Resident Evil* (2002) and the *Resident Evil*\(^\text{11}\) film franchise in Chapter 4; and Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2001) in Chapter 5. I have chosen these films in part because they are all historically referential and intertextual, and while all of them allude to 9/11, they also reference other historical events. What is at stake in the intersection of history and an inquiry into the concept of anthropocentrism is that the human itself is a historical rather than a natural concept, one that is tenuous and aggressively sustained by claims from all areas of culture, including film. In my filmic archive is a host of historical references to atrocities that are the result of speciesism, racism, and sexism. These atrocities, such as animal testing, genocide, and rape, are in turn made possible by an anthropocentric view that positions some figures as human but not others. For instance, *Resident Evil* (2002) makes allusions to the Twin Towers, and

---
\(^{11}\) The *Resident Evil* films are largely Canadian in terms of production, although they serve as transnational hybrids insofar as some of the films—particularly the first, are American-German productions. Nevertheless, their diegetic world tilts to America.
*Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) references the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima when Raccoon City is decimated by an atomic bomb. In *28 Days Later*, there are visual references to: Piccadilly Circus as the equivalent to New York’s Ground Zero of the film, but also the gassing of the Kurds, Rwandan genocide, and the imperialistic social, gendered and racialized hierarchy in British history. In *Diary of the Dead* there are clips from Hurricane Katrina, but also the non-specific filming of ambiguous news stories, attacks, deaths, and personal and private mourning made public—including the “documentary” that the film consists of—that translates into more experiences and events than 9/11. In *World War Z*, there is direct reference to the Israeli West Bank Barrier that runs partly along the 1949 Jordanian-Israeli armistice line and partly through the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and an underlying ambivalence about the representation of the United States as a virtuous superpower. Moreover, the films’ opening sequences resonate with 9/11 via the notion of a beautiful and typical fall day in America that ends in an unthinkable and devastating urban apocalypse that recalls the destruction at Ground Zero in New York: a montage of banal “talking head” news clips, television personalities, and close ups of vicious animal worlds and ecological catastrophe invades the screen while Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt) and his family leave suburbia and find themselves in the middle of panic, explosions, and the zombie apocalypse in downtown Philadelphia. Ambiguously set in late summer or early fall in the midst of an unprecedented heat wave in Raccoon City, *Apocalypse* begins the same way in order to create a sense of allegorical synergy via a city on the edge of urban apocalypse. These are just a few such references that warrant detailed analysis in the chapters themselves. It is not necessarily that all of these films mean for viewers to connect the action of the films to Rwanda, the Kurds, and so on, although some of them, as will become clear in the
chapters themselves, undoubtedly mean to do just that. I would argue that consciously or not, the films cannot help but mediate the implications of these events: that at their center is an ideological anthropocentrism that defines the human against its “others” and treats them accordingly. One could easily apply Danny Boyle’s statement—that the images of human brutality, war, and religious intolerance seen at the opening of *28 Days Later*, suggest ongoing reality as we know and live it—to all of these films. In effect, with traumatic historical events weaving their way in and out of these films and many others too numerous to address in this work—many of which directly or indirectly reference the collapse of the World Trade Center and “The War on Terror”—it becomes clear that the trauma of history and the history of trauma itself is, like the Mobius, cyclically represented and unfinished, and in the current cultural moment it is clear that 9/11 has not ended, particularly for those whose lives were directly as well as indirectly impacted by it. Zombie films in particular have significant resonance since like the cyclical repetition of terror and trauma, the zombie is the epitome of the horrific figure that, like the revenant, continually returns.

Although not particular to the United States, the majority of popular zombie films are produced there and perhaps following the lead of George A. Romero, are preoccupied with exposing and critiquing predominantly America-centric cultural fears and anxieties. That said, the films I have selected for analysis all include—often in their opening sequences, sometimes near their end, sometimes at both—a variety of simulated, historically and currently resonant apocalypses brought about as a result of human-centered views implicit in speciesism, which has been linked to racism, and sexism, as some of the examples above suggest, and/or by zombies. As a result, these films theorize and show us that the apocalypse

---

12 See Charity, 70.
is particularly an apocalypse of anthropocentrism. The reason is that the apocalypse creates terror that, since it addresses the end of anthropocentrism, sublimates into the terror that the human might not be as self-evident—or as un-problematically definable—as one might think. In other words, these films critique normative and entrenched representations of the human and anthropocentrism, and mark significant problems with humanism in that it often relies upon the dehumanization of its “others.” After all, the central problem of anthropocentrism is that it is based upon, as I mentioned, what Wolfe calls the “fantasy figure” of the human, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. At this juncture, I want to focus on Wolfe’s contention that the anthropocentric figure of the human is just that: a fantasy; an imaginary construction that is impossible or improbable yet has allowed for atrocities to be committed against those considered to be in-human or sub-human throughout history. Slavery, the Holocaust, and numerous abuses suffered by all “animalized” others are just a few cases in point. By exploring the fragility of “the human” and anthropocentrism, and by exposing ideological biases associated with them, these films draw attention to how the ideological constructs of speciesism, sexism, and racism are interrelated and, thus, upheld. At the same time, by presenting us with apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic worlds inhabited by undead figures that signify that life and death as separate categories are themselves an illusion, these films invite a critical posthumanism that does not see the posthuman as an end in itself, but rather as a means by which terror and dehumanization can be considered in a way that has not yet been done. In other words, anthropocentrism contains within itself its own undoing, which is the figure of the zombie: on the one hand, the historical roots of the zombie suggest that it is a figure appropriated and othered by imperial western colonizers who were focused on the abjection of zombiism and sensationalized ritual practices in Haiti in order to save the
Caribbean from itself. In this process, the zombie figure was appropriated to justify American occupation, imperialism, and racism. Rather than emancipate Haiti, American occupation effectively “re-enslaved the Haitians, reinstating the plantation system, forcing Haitians to build roads, and brutalizing thousands of peasants” (Braham 41). These actions only served to repeat Haiti’s history of exploitation and slavery, which in turn paved the way for the introduction of the Atlantic slave trade, the plantation system, racial alienation, and structures of poverty, dependence, and dominance that persist in Haiti to the present day. However, although the zombie figure has been used as a justification of slavery, animalization, and racism, its state as a liminal figure that resists easy identification as a subject or an object, and its ability in narrative film and literature to bring about the end of the human world through apocalypse, poses problems to anthropocentrism. In other words, the zombie is one of the only horror figures that heralds—almost without exception in horrific rather than comedic zombie films—the end of the human world, and with it, the notion that the human species and the human figure is guaranteed survival.

I want to consider what happens when zombie apocalypse and posthumanist theory merge in order to push the limit of anthropocentrism and to consider new ways of theorizing that limit. Some posthuman scholars—particularly Morton and Braidotti—pose many questions about the world and its end, the Anthropocene, and about concepts of life and death in a way that run curiously parallel to Gothic excavations of apocalypse and terror without crossing paths with them. For instance, in speaking of the end of the world, Morton uses ecological posthumanism to argue, as I mentioned, that the real place we all inhabit on Earth is a charnel ground. What he means by this is a space where suffering and ecological co-

---

13 See, for instance, Braham, “Monsters of the Carribbean”, Rhodes, and McIntosh.
existence cannot be denied, where our aesthetic and anesthetizing construct of the world fails us, and most evocatively, as a place of undeath where zombies, demons, DNA refuse, radiation, and so on are ubiquitous. Morton calls for an ecological awareness and appropriate response to this reality, but does not think to mine the way in which the apocalypse of zombie narratives also calls for such awareness, and for the awareness that the human is a construct that can be challenged. Similarly, Braidotti’s concept of posthumanism provides an exciting way to think about the zombie in film although she never makes the connection explicit herself. For Braidotti, engaging with the posthuman in part means stressing what she calls the self-organizing or “auto-poietic force of living matter”(3). Braidotti asserts that the binary opposition between life and death that is considered natural—and therefore, which supposedly marks the zombie as un-natural—does not hold. She argues that one’s view on death depends on one’s assumptions about life, and for her, “life is cosmic energy, simultaneously empty chaos and absolute speed or movement. It is impersonal and inhuman in the monstrous, animal sense of radical alterity: zoe in all its powers” (131). This description is anathema to humanist thought, which for centuries has ascribed meaning and purpose to human life in particular. Zoe, in Braidotti’s terms, is “the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself (Braidotti 2006, 2011b) [and] stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains” (“Post-Anthropocentrism” 60). Included in this assessment are not just human and non-human animals, but matter in general, so that matter is in itself vital, an idea that comes to life in the figure of the undead. Referring to Spinoza’s concept that matter, humans, and the world at large are not diametrically opposed, Braidotti posits recognizing a monistic universe, in which all matter is thus ontologically free (56). Without the rigid
boundaries that designate the fault lines of humanism, life and death, and nature and culture, the idea of a universal and fixed human nature loses its ontological authority; the anthropocentric subject is dethroned. Within this framework, the zombie figure is perhaps the quintessential figure because it allegorizes this conceptual shift to a post-human/post-anthropocentric subject in that it collapses the above distinctions. The zombie, in other words, is “dead” matter paradoxically in motion inhabiting an unthinkable liminal space between two states of being. Moreover, for those infected and transitioning, the zombie emphasizes not simply life or death, but a posthuman becoming that resonates with Braidotti’s concept of a life-death continuum. Indeed, Braidotti asserts that the posthuman subject is spurred on by waves of becoming, and that Zoe is the “ontological motor” that fuels the change (“The Inhuman” 135-136). To my mind, in these terms, the zombie is itself a posthuman subject that signals the impossibility of determining the ontology of matter itself and the impossibility of separating humans from—and valuing them as above and distinct from—animals and the world at large. I argue that what the figure of the zombie does in film is to highlight the impossibility of endorsing a figure of the human that purports to do all these things: claim a stable and abiding ontology of the human and uphold distinctions between an ideal human figure and ethnic, racial, gendered, and animal others. In other words, the zombie figure exposes the ideological and, thus, conceptual biases and limits of the human. Moreover, the zombie subgenre and the films I have selected from it are engaged with a range of critical, affective, and sometimes contradictory positions that are never

---

14 It might be argued that in zombie films the “motor” that fuels change is composed of man-made viruses, nuclear radiation and so on. While this is true, Braidotti argues that matter is one; it is ontologically free. If matter is vital and self-organizing, so that zoe “stands for generative vitality” and is the “self-organizing structure of life itself” (“Post-Anthropocentrism: Life Beyond the Species” 60), I would argue that humans and the viruses themselves are part of zoe, which as a driving force underwrites the human itself, and its creations.
singular, but which sometimes interact and build upon each other. At the heart of each is an exploration of the limits of anthropocentrism and how those limits do not hold.

Chapter 2, which will focus on Romero’s *Diary of the Dead* (2008), opens my dissertation since, as I mentioned, there is a tendency in current scholarship to focus almost exclusively on the work of George A. Romero, whose *Dead* trilogy consists of what is by far the most widely analyzed zombie films by scholars who tend to argue—and I would agree here—that Romero’s films provide some of the most progressive political commentary on American society.\(^\text{15}\) With six zombie films known for their sociopolitical criticism of American society from 1968 through to 2010, he is rightfully acknowledged by McSweeney as the “‘godfather’” of the zombie subgenre (108). *Diary of the Dead* is one of his lesser known and analyzed films despite its rich potential in addressing questions of posthumanism and critiquing the fantasy behind the figure of the human, which is why it is included in this project. I would be remiss not to address Romero’s work in a dissertation about zombies; but I want to stress here that my goal is to avoid what I see as a tendency to aggrandize Romero’s work and mythology at the expense of other zombie films. In fact, this chapter serves as a point of departure from Romero and from current scholarship while introducing the limits of both. To elucidate, in Romero’s canon, the literature that engages it, and the zombie genre of film in general, I have discovered an anthropocentric critique that too often conflates the human with the zombie by claiming that “they” are “us”. Assuming that there is a cohesive “us”, a reifiable human figure that is un-problematically inclusive and definitive, reflects a continued tendency towards an un-critical anthropocentric framework. While productive in

\(^{15}\) *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Day of the Dead* (1985). Such scholars include Wetmore and Pagano; see also Bishop’s *American Zombie Gothic.*
the sense that it leads the viewer to question the legitimacy of a hierarchy based on American exceptionalism in Romero’s films—and of only certain Americans at that—the “they” are “us” argument does not trouble the fantasy figure of the human itself. I am not discussing Romero at length in this dissertation because the work of exploring the human in the monster has been done; what is yet to be examined is the limits of Romero’s foundational zombie figure, which exposes the anthropocentric bias at the heart of his films, much of the scholarship, and the genre itself. This chapter serves as a place to deviate from some current critical investigations into the zombie film phenomenon: analyses of Romero’s work tends to come back to a recurring thesis that again serves as the base-line for the sub-genre: that the zombies are us. Such arguments obscure as much as they reveal, unable, as they are, to confront the “us” that they purport to discover. Unfortunately, the ongoing admiration for Romero’s work has created a blind spot in current criticism that overlooks the merit in other zombie films that also seriously ask this question. For instance, Adam Lowenstein calls Romero’s trilogy “extraordinary” and goes on to analyze Diary of the Dead (2008) and Land of the Dead, which he claims have a particular sense of temporality and relevance in their respective cultural and political moments that gives them brevity (108). Lowenstein makes this claim while asserting that films like Danny Boyle’s 28 Days Later (2002) are lacking by comparison, a claim that I will take issue with in Chapter 5 in particular.

In Chapter 2, I will also begin to explore the way in which Romero has set the standard for zombies to be slow—that is, a persistent, unavoidable threat—as a way of setting up questions for Chapters 4 and especially Chapter 5, in which speed of zombies and speed as a general concept is a central theoretical concern that, as I will argue, carries a moral bias that links speed to anthropocentrism. It must be kept firmly in mind that despite
Romero’s continued contribution to the genre, his work and the zombie subgenre of horror do not exist in a vacuum; his definition of the zombie is not the only or necessarily the best definition. Again, in this chapter I want to focus on the merits of Romero’s “they” are “us” thesis as a means of demonstrating the limits of the human figure on the one hand. On the other, I will demonstrate the limits of Romero’s own tendency to construct and reify the ‘real’ human or the ‘real’ zombie, particularly since Diary critiques the notion that there is a reality beyond representation to which one can appeal in the first place. Diary creates a limited but productive space in which to start thinking about the zombie as a posthuman figure, and it also provides a transition point: earlier I mentioned that Romero’s film critiques the legitimacy of American exceptionalism—which in turn is based on racial, species, and gendered hierarchies—but that it does not question the fantasy figure of the human. In Chapter 3, World War Z more thoroughly and productively offers a critical space in which to do both.

Because I read 9/11 as a cultural benchmark that has prompted questions about self and other, terrorist and non-terrorist, and the human versus the de-humanized or objectified, Chapter 3 opens with the most recent post-9/11 zombie film, World War Z (2013), which has an investment in imagining American exceptionalism in the face of a zombie world war, and by extension, American exceptionalism represented in intervention in international affairs. That is to say, the film seems to employ a sort of soft hegemony, by which America asserts its superiority and benevolence via an Obama-esque cooperation with the rest of the world as opposed to the hard hegemony of George W. Bush. I want to emphasize that while posthumanism is not often read as a central concern of 9/11 as an event of cultural significance, mediations of 9/11 in the screen culture of zombie films most definitely are.
That is, the film grapples with the implications of determining American hero Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt) as the only fully “human” individual in the film by demonstrating how being “human” justifies the horrific treatment of various groups, ethnic minorities, those labelled “terrorists”, and so on. American exceptionalism is a rich and complex concept, and it is necessary to clarify what I mean when I use this term going forward. Scholars such as Seymour Lipset describe America as exceptional in that unlike most of Europe, which focused on monarchy and hierarchal class systems, America lacked a feudal past and was “more socially egalitarian, more meritocratic, more rights-oriented, and more religious” (Still the Exceptional Nation?32). Focusing on a positive understanding of American exceptionalism, Lipset notes that American affluence and education has resulted in a focus on education, health, the environment, and the birth of “modern movements for egalitarian social change such as feminism, environmentalism, civil rights for minorities, and gay rights” (35). Indeed, Michael Ignatieff argues in a similar vein that the United States took a leading role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and creating the United Nations, establishing human rights organizations that promoted the abolition of slavery, religious freedom, women’s rights, and which monitored the human rights performance of other governments.16 However, while it is a nation that has contributed much in the way of human rights, the United States has proved itself exceptional in less positive ways: as Lipset notes, American exceptionalism is double-edged in that it is less egalitarian than the rest of the developed world in economic terms, has some of the lowest rates of voter turnout, the highest rate of violent crime, and disproportionate levels of income inequality and poverty per capita, in part due to its focus on individualism and meritocracy (41). More, the free

market economy of America that is based on capitalism “does not pledge to eliminate poverty, racism, sexism, pollution, or war. It does not even promise great material rewards to all” (45). It is not the state of exceptionalism in America that is based on its role as a world leader in democracy that I am interested in here, but the problematic ways in which it claims exceptionalism in terms of human rights and its self-importance in determining who has the right to life, particularly in the context of 9/11 but also in relation to sexism and racism.

Ignatieff argues that what makes America exceptional is that it has “displayed exceptional leadership in promoting human rights” since 1945, and yet, “it has also resisted complying with human rights standards at home or aligning its foreign policy with these standards abroad” (1). He argues that America is not exceptional in its arrogance, hypocrisy, or inconsistency since other counties can certainly be accused of the same. Rather, it is the contradictory role America plays as leader and outlier when it comes to human rights. As noted above, on the one hand Ignatieff points out the significant contributions America has made to improve human rights domestically and internationally. On the other hand, and most notably in relation to the attacks of 9/11, he argues that America “has been accused of violating the [Geneva] Convention as well as the Torture Convention in its handling of the prisoners at Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and other detention facilities” (2). In the months and years following the fall of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, the living dead rose and became ideologically entrenched in the politics and the culture of the United States when they became part of the terminology of the “War on Terror.”

In speaking about the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld “asserted that many of the prisoners, although technically alive, were officially ‘living dead’ as they had been the

---

17 McSweeney, 108.
intended targets of American bombs and could therefore be treated accordingly” (McSweeney 108). In other words, because the American government had already decided that the prisoners’ lives were of no consequence—that they were, in fact, as good as dead despite being alive—their liminal status as living dead was invoked to justify any treatment the government saw necessary. Ignatieff notes that exemptionalism is a variant of exceptionalism, whereby the United States ensured that the conditions of detention at Guantanamo Bay were in accordance with Geneva Convention standards, but the status of prisoners and interrogation procedures were determined by the president (5) and thus provided an exemption for the detainees’ right to life. ‘Living dead’ in Rumsfeld’s terms, then, emphasizes several assumptions about the prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay: that they could justifiably be called the enemies of America and Americans, that due to that status they can and should be destroyed, and that they are not ‘human’ in some essential way that Americans are. To elaborate, I use the word ‘destroyed’ rather than ‘killed’ here because in Rumsfeld’s rhetoric, as an abject figure that is living-dead and worthy of destruction, the zombie ostensibly lacks the basic criteria of bare life to even be killed.\(^\text{18}\) It follows that this rhetoric objectifies, even animalizes, the prisoners to justify their abuse and torture in the name of American morality, revenge, and patriotism, all the while reasserting the humanity of Americans and Westerners more broadly while dehumanizing many of those people outside Western borders. Here, I am thinking of American exceptionalism in terms of some of the elements of exceptionalism Ignatieff outlines; namely, that the “United States signs on to international human rights and humanitarian law conventions and treaties and then exempts itself from their provisions by explicit reservation, nonratification, or non-

\(^{18}\) Bare life refers to Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer*, a “victim who may be killed but not sacrificed” in a sovereign sphere (“Sacred Life” 53).
compliance” (3). In a more general sense, I use the term American exceptionalism to describe the assumed rights, privileges, and exceptional qualities assigned to America and Americans alone, and by America, particularly in the context of the films I offer for analysis. Moreover, I use the term as an extension of human exceptionalism, a concept in which humans are assumed, ostensibly, to be in some way exceptional as compared to non-human animals. For this project then, American exceptionalism touches on the complexity of America’s role in a human rights context, and especially the ways in which the quintessential and exceptional human figure comes to be represented as American.

Implicit in Rumsfeld’s statement about the Middle Eastern prisoners is his labelling of “terrorists,” which can be understood in this context as synonymous with non-humans, and thus with the ‘living dead’ or that which could be destroyed without legal or moral pause. As such, the question of the human is one that has become powerful and intricately entwined with American politics and with the figure of the zombie. Being classified as living-dead is an oxymoron that implies a liminality; a non-being that is neither classifiable nor definitive, not even in terms of its otherness. This position is one of extreme vulnerability and facilitates the post 9/11 demonization of non-western others. In “The State of Exception as a Paradigm of Government,” Giorgio Agamben defines “noncitizens suspected of involvement in terrorist activities” in the United States in terms of a state of exception, “where law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension” (3). Referencing a “‘military order’” issued by George Bush on November 13, 2001, Agamben notes that “this order erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnamable and unclassifiable being” (3). Similar to zombies that are also unclassifiable and destroyed because of their undead liminality, captives are effectively treated as subhuman. As
Agamben notes, not only do the Taliban captured in Afghanistan not enjoy the status of POWs as defined by the Geneva Convention, they do not even have the status of persons charged with a crime according to American laws (3). Like the zombie figure to which they are compared, the fate of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay is beyond sight of the law and in their non-human state, they can indeed be treated accordingly by America as a sovereign nation. That is, a nation with the right to kill.\(^\text{19}\) The activities associated with Thanatos-politics\(^\text{20}\)

appear\[\] to function through dividing people into those who must live and those who must die. Operating on the basis of a split between the living and the dead, such a power defines itself in relation to a biological field—which it takes control of and vests itself in. (Mbembe 156)

In America, the rhetoric of biopower is evident in the “War on Terror” in that the population sought to strengthen security by attacking any non-American others perceived as a terrorist threat, or at best by keeping them out. In this context, having discussed the contributions of but also and especially the limitations of Romero’s canon and the scholarship thus far conducted on it in Chapter 2, World War Z opens up some of the questions at stake in using posthumanist theory to highlight the interconnectedness of ideological oppressions such as speciesism, sexism, and racism by showing they have roots in anthropocentrism as it informs contemporary historical and cultural contexts.

\(^{19}\) In “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe notes that sovereignty is “expressed predominantly as the right to kill” (156).

\(^{20}\) See Braidotti, 120. Thanatos is a God of death.
In Chapter 4, I extend the concerns of dehumanization that are associated with technology in Chapter 2 and 3, building on them to trouble how anthropocentrism functions as a destructive force in the capitalist, corporate world. In a more literal sense, *Resident Evil* allows for an exploration of what happens to the figure of the human in a post-apocalyptic world when human interventions into technological innovation, viral weaponry, genetic engineering and the commodification of life reveal slippages in ontology as mutations occur. In part, the narrative challenges humanist ideology through mutation and technological development and emphasizes the racist, sexist, and speciesist disposition of Western corporatism. On the other hand, the narrative provides a counter-figure in protagonist Alice (Milla Jovovich) that is in many ways no less limiting than a fantasy figure of the human. Alice herself is Caucasian, thin, able bodied, and conventionally beautiful by Western standards and thus reinforces rather than unseats Hollywood patriarchal bias. In contrast, a posthuman approach to the films draws attention to the inherent ideological biases of humanism and anthropocentrism that underlie patriarchy and exposes the fantasy behind the human by showing it to be historically rather than essentially determined. What becomes clear is the realization that based on this construction, atrocious acts of dehumanization have been committed. Posthuman theory allows for a reading of the film that foregrounds who is excluded from being human on the grounds of race, species, ethnicity, and sex, but it also suggests—via a focus on the constantly mutating zombies, non-human animals, and human figures in *Resident Evil*—that ontology cannot be fixed. Consequently, the films speak to the horror of recognizing that the figure of the human is, indeed, a fantasy that is always already ontologically unsustainable.
The plethora of zombie films in Romero’s wake are consistently held to his standards and often found wanting; this is particularly true in some of the scholarship on Resident Evil (2002). For instance, Laura Wilson and Richard Hand both write on Resident Evil but argue that compared to Romero’s films, Resident Evil and Apocalypse (2004) are devoid of social commentary at best, and fall into racist and sexist stereotyping at worst. What both scholars lack in their criticism of the films is an awareness that these stereotypes have a purpose in highlighting the normative limitations of anthropocentrism and the abject identities it bestows on those who do not meet its criteria. Also, they miss an opportunity to examine the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic world and posthuman potential of the film series. To be fair, only the first two films were released at the time those articles were written, but to my mind, the films make space for a criticism of the anthropocentric ideology that supports social injustice. My argument is in opposition to similar critics like Hand, Harper, and Wilson, who likewise claim that racist, classist, and sexist stereotypes undermine any useful analysis that can be made of the film(s). I am also pushing against Mitchell’s contention that Resident Evil is uninterested in a critical gesture around biocommerce. Despite such a supposedly unpromising film, then, the series as a whole is the only one in my study in which a total world apocalypse is realized and post-apocalypse explored, and in which I uncover something quite remarkable: the apocalypse that plays out over the course of the Resident Evil story when approached via posthuman questions about the world and its end, makes space for an analysis of the human in the context of apocalypse that has not yet been considered by critics ready to dismiss this series.

21 See Chapter 4, in which I detail how over-emphasis on Romero severely undersells Resident Evil by comparison.
In Chapter 5, I shift my discussion to the final film in my analysis, Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002). The film is of particular interest because despite being the only film I will examine that is neither set nor produced in the United States, it sets the precedent for the fast-moving zombie that dominates screens today. Moreover, it establishes a crisis of British empire that aligns with the crisis of empire in American zombie films—particularly *WWZ*. To my mind, it is *28 Days Later* that re-invented the zombie figure in a significant way since Romero redefined the zombie—originally an indentured figure from Haitian and Caribbean folklore made zombie by a bokor—as a cannibalistic ghoul. Boyle’s zombies are unique in that they are not dead but infected; not slow but fast. As such, they break with a supposed zombie ontology in the extant criticism that imagines the zombie as necessarily slow: this also assumes that in the narrative of most zombie films, humans are reassured of the zombie’s incompetence and of having the time to rationalize a response to their threat. The veil between lived reality and the world of the film becomes disturbingly transparent since the Rage virus awakens unease concerning the spread of disease such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, Ebola, or Mad Cow (BSE), which began infecting humans in Europe in the late 90s; this fear builds upon the idea of things gone viral both technological and biological in earlier chapters. A viral epidemic that devastates England—an island that is subsequently quarantined—is easier to believe then the fall of the entire world. And yet, the issues of violence, classicism, racism, sexism, and speciesism that are enabled by the doctrine of humanism are played out to great effect in the film in scenes that largely omit the infected altogether. As such, the realism of the film helps to synthesize the claims the other chapters make about the fragility of the human in a context that more easily and transparently grafts onto the real world for political affect.
In this chapter, considerations of mediation and technology explored in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are enriched and synthesized as I theorize, via Stephen Bertman, Paul Virilio, and others, how terror is related to life, quickness, technological advancements, and the manipulation of speed and time in the film. These critics look at speed in terms of an inability to keep pace in an ever accelerating technological world, but their work is useful in considering how the human cost of speed is relevant to the increasing speed of zombies. Carroll Jordan considers speed in zombie films and in 28 Days Later in terms of a lack of preparedness and risk management failure, but I have a particular interest in this chapter in examining the increased speed of the zombies in particular, which is under-theorized to date. Considering the number of post 9/11 zombie films that feature fast zombies—including those in the Resident Evil world, how this film theorizes speed is important. I will turn back to Romero’s unwavering insistence that zombies must be slow, since he has encouraged vehement debates about whether fast or slow zombies are better/more believable, and as such, we find ourselves locked into a single way of reading the figure; one that asks the wrong questions. Rather than ask whether fast or slow zombies are ‘better’ on an arbitrary weigh-scale, it is more useful to ask why zombies are becoming fast; why some contemporary films feature a mix of both slow and fast zombies, why some films still maintain that they should be slow. My main interest is in examining the value of slowness versus speed in zombie films, which leads me to a key discovery in this chapter: the realization that most of the scholarship to date on speed in general and speed in zombie film reveals a moral and ideological investment in slowness. That is, an un-examined preference for careful planning, action, and reflective thinking that is supposedly preferable to actions and thoughts undertaken quickly, un-reflectively, and in haste. This same moral groundwork
primarily facilitates the animalization of the accelerated zombies/infected in 28 Days Later, but speed in the film is far more complex than simply asserting that acceleration, or acceleration alone, is synonymous with violence and societal disintegration.

Zombies in 28 Days are actually humans infected with a virus called “Rage,” which simply exacerbates the capacity for the ostensible violence inherent in humans and non-human animals already. As previously suggested, the key here is an inversion of the assumption that “rage”, acceleration and violence go hand in hand and are qualities that only non-human animals demonstrate. In fact, the dividing line separating the zombified “infected” of the film from the survivors and from the non-human animals (Rage-infected Chimpanzees) is assumed but actually non-existent. Moreover, the film insidiously warns that “Rage” is not simply a contracted virus, and thus it cannot be ‘cured’ or removed from living beings. Its presence effectively levels assumptions about human exceptionalism. As Sherryl Vint argues, the “rapid and animal-like movements of the infected and the aesthetic of their dispatch” indulges a de-humanization of them and the survivors who kill them (“Abject Posthumanism” 137), but her analysis stops short of troubling what it might mean to call the infected “animal-like”, and how an ideological bias towards anthropocentrism is implicit in such a sweeping term. On the whole, the film posits that the boundary between human and monster, and human and animal, is illusory at best. As Judith Halberstam argues throughout Skin Shows, monster-making “is a suspect activity because it relies upon and shores up conventional humanist binaries” (“Bodies that Splatter” 143). Graham echoes this sentiment when she claims that during the European Enlightenment, the monster represented moral limits and defined the human and ‘human nature’ as “self-evidently virtuous, constitutionally incapable of acts of hatred, intentional harm and malice” (“The Gates” 50).
Boyle’s narrative offers a critique of British colonialism and imperialism, it also offers a critique of the humanist ideology used by Major West (Christopher Eccleston)—a name pointedly allegorizing Western colonialism—and his military brigade to dehumanize others. Moreover, in this chapter I want to address questions of speciesism, animality, and violence. In conjunction with speed, zombies in contemporary films have begun to embody limited qualities—that is to say, convenient qualities used to deepen the ontological divide between human and non-human animals—associated with large, predatory animals: growling, hunting, and the like. In my Conclusion, I return to the import of the posthuman and the zombie apocalyptic as complimentary approaches that are germane to subgenre of horror that is itself built upon vexed eschatology. Given the ways in which the crypt, the cryptic nature of apocalypse, and the repetitive and cyclical nature of discussing the return of the living dead resonates, I would argue that a Derridian turn to apocalypse and endings without end is the most fitting way to close this project, as opposed to a strictly materialist approach. Further, my overall methodology involves a combination of narrative analysis and scene/form analysis; as an interdisciplinary dissertation, this project draws upon my extensive training in the analysis of literary texts. A narrative approach is one that has allowed more nuanced investigations into the filmic archive than a focus on scene analysis alone could accomplish.

What is significant about the contemporary zombie figure as monster is that it is, to my knowledge, the only monster-type whose modus operandi is to unwittingly and rapidly bring about the end of the human world, with few filmic exceptions.\textsuperscript{22} As such, it is a genre

\textsuperscript{22} There are zomedies from this archive that are invariably humanist, but they are not part of this study because they suggest an entirely different study that is beyond the scope of this project.
invested in unsettling the viewer and prompting them to question assumptions about what constitutes the human, rather than necessarily placating the viewer through a return to the status quo that ultimately re-draws the line between human and non-human/monster. Zombie films have a unique way of undermining such a return when it does seem to occur: in Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), for example, the film ends with lawmakers defeating the zombies; the day dawns, society is no longer under threat, and yet this return to normalcy offers no relief for the viewer, who has just witnessed the anticlimactic shooting of the film’s only survivor—a shooting that may or may not have happened because the man was African-American and not mistaken for a zombie—followed by a disturbing series of images showing the dragging and burning of corpses. In the context of the Civil Rights Movement and racism in 1960s America, Romero’s film asks the viewer to consider the problems of a humanism that ultimately presents male, Caucasian lawmakers as the default human subject. To my mind, the more recent humanist appeal in films like *World War Z* in particular—which imagines a handsome, heterosexual, white and American family man as the epitome of the human subject and a representative of America as world leader—is shrill, wheedling, and altogether unconvincing. Using camouflage—a military strategy—against the zombies rather than finding a cure or a cause indicates the embracing of military solutions rather than medical cures and research that would solve the problem at its source. As such, the narrative feels as though it advocates for destroying the symptom rather than the cause of the zombie pandemic; desperately cleaving to a desire for a restored order, safety, and reification of the human subject in a way that has become impossible. The refusal of the zombie sub-genre to reinstate the human—that is, the ‘human’ as constructed by humanist thought—is suggestive of the end of human, although as Braidotti points out, we can never
really move beyond it. What a posthuman approach does allow via zombie apocalypse is a way of sharply highlighting what my chosen films find lacking in anthropocentrism: a consideration and empathy for animals, women, the dis-abled, the colonized, racial minorities, and others, in a way that is horrific, sensationalistic, and affective. In the context of apocalypse, the zombie shows us an interactive map of Morton’s necropolis: the place where posthumanism and zombie apocalypse intersect, where we can no longer ignore ecological catastrophe and suffering, where we recognize in Haraway’s terms that we have never been human because that figure is an historical rather than a natural construction, and where we must ask ourselves what is to be done at the “end” of anthropocentrism, at which point it becomes undeniably clear that the figure of the human is limited and reductive.  

Continuing to blindly endorse anthropocentrism suggests a willful ignorance of the ongoing suffering caused by the atrocities that speciesism, sexism, and racism create in their wake, and such blindness is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain and justify. If apocalyptic zombie films help viewers to become aware that they are already living in a more than human world—a necropolis populated by the un-dead and characterized by ecological devastation and the suffering of living beings—we must recognize that the current state of affairs is nightmarish, but houses the possibility of a world worth living in; a post-anthropocentric future built on shifting relationalities between human animals and the world in which they live.

---

23 See Nicholas Gane’s interview with Haraway: “When We Have Never Been Human, What is to be Done?” 135-158.
Chapter 2 “They” are “us”, but Who or What are We? The Limits of the Human, Deceptive Realism, and Zombification by Moving Image in George A. Romero’s Diary of the Dead

Without a doubt, Romero’s Dead films are deeply entrenched in American politics and culture. Widely understood as the director of all zombie film directors, Romero has never been interested in just reflecting the social and political concerns in America; he also endeavors to offer a critical perspective on American society and politics that encourages the viewer to examine internalized and dominant societal narratives. For instance, in Land of the Dead (2005), such satiric narratives include the justified invasion of Iraq by the United States, which is perceived as heroic and righteous. Diary of the Dead (2008) is among the least theorized of Romero’s films and is commonly bypassed in favor of his many others, likely due to poor acting, cheap production values that are part of the film’s charm, pace, and meta-quality, as well as Diary’s heavy-handed criticism of the ways that governments and other political agencies encourage radio and news broadcasters to promote biased and political representations of events in order to assert their version of what is true. In Diary, Romero asserts that over-investment in media and an un-critical acceptance of its messages has the effect of zombifying Western society. This overinvestment in media means making the viewer complicit in acts of tragedy and violence that they actively and endlessly consume via news, radio, television, and social media, and also draws attention to the way in which spectatorship not only seems to offer distance from what is being viewed but also results in apathy; an emotional and physical dissociation from events and people. In Diary, using a

24 With the exception of Survival of the Dead (2009), Romero’s latest contribution to the archive which received dismal reviews from both viewers and critics. On Rotten Tomatoes, only 30% of critics and 20% of the audience liked the film (“Survival of the Dead (2010)”, Rotten Tomatoes, Flixter Inc.)
video camera to represent the world and disseminate information becomes means by which to suggest that the communication technologies and social media platforms in the pockets of everyday people enable a technological virulence that in turn zombifies. Romero attempts to make the zombie figure new by suggesting that in an increasingly technological world, zombification no longer requires flesh, blood, and the body for self-replication, but rather, executable files, shared images and video footage, and so on. Given the proliferation of communication technologies worldwide, *Diary* is a reflection on but also a criticism of the current cultural moment of instantaneous digital information that is itself spread like an infection hourly throughout the world. In this film, the spread of the organic zombie virus is paralleled by viral video and the practice of filming in order to suggest that the virulence of digital video is responsible for zombification. *Diary* is one such digital video, but in the film narrative *Diary* is represented as a found-footage shockumentary, a film within a film: in the opening scene the viewer is told by voiceover that the video they are watching is called *The Death of Death*, ostensibly the raw and impossibly ‘real’ documentary that student film major Jason Creed (Joshua Close) begins, and which his girlfriend Debra Moynihan (Michelle Morgan) eventually finishes and uploads onto MySpace.

*Diary* re-imagines and revises the first days of a zombie apocalypse in the context of current and ubiquitous communication technology in a media saturated society as it chronicles the experience of a handful of college film students and their professor, and it is framed through Jason’s camera lens as he attempts to film a low-budget mummy horror film as a thesis project when they hear accounts of the dead returning to life. Romero equates

---

25 This notion of instantaneous digital information in the sense of going viral is a manifestation of speed. As speed in zombie films is the central focus of Chapter 5, I am not going into detail here.
Jason with a zombie by arguing that the process of filmmaking dehumanizes him, and as Randy Laist claims, the title *Diary* does not refer to the hordes of zombies as the word ‘dead’ does in his other films; it “attaches the dreaded zombie moniker to the subjects telling the story” (108). One of my goals in this chapter, however, is to disrupt and critique Romero’s view that technology dehumanizes in that such a view takes for granted that there is an inclusive and agreed upon human subject available to dehumanize in the first place, a contention that underwrites much of the scholarship on zombies to date.  

Romero draws viewer attention to the signs of production in the “documentary” that are normally effaced in order to maintain the illusion of transparency. In other words, *Diary* draws attention to the ways in which realist visual texts—the news, television, documentaries, and *Diary* itself since it is framed as a documentary—are dependent on framing techniques and thus do not, in fact cannot, tell the ‘truth’ about ‘reality.’ That is, a selective privileging of ideas, voiceovers, shots, auditory cues, music, and editing shows that realism is a genre. By realist or realism, I mean a way of filming that claims to represent things as they really are; to tell the truth about social, political, and economic realities via supposedly transparent means: one films nothing more or less than what is in front of the camera. However, Romero troubles this realist conceit by drawing attention to how things are mediated, “a process by which a pre-given reality [is] transformed by the act of filming into a filmed representation of that reality” (Lapsley and Westlake 160), and that has political implications which are necessarily biased. One of the things *Diary* does not think through are the limits of mediation itself; that in order to represent ‘reality’, there must be a definitive reality to which representations

---

26 I use “dehumanize” rather than animalize in this case because in *Diary*, there is a suggestion that to be human is to be empathetic while the process of filming and zombification results in a deadening of this empathy and all emotions. Because I am calling into question assumptions about what it means to humanize and dehumanize in this chapter, I use the word strategically.
correspond. As I will show, his troubling of ‘reality’ allows for a critique of Romero’s own underlying assumptions about what really constitutes being ‘human’; a set of assumptions I am calling into question. This idea has not been theorized in the literature to date.

For the most part, current scholarship details the way in which Romero’s films provide a Gothic allegory for the disruption or destruction of American hegemony, while offering scathing but relevant political critiques of the times in which they are made. Some scholars do read the zombie in terms of media: Allan Cameron, for instance, argues that the contemporary zombie is a “media zombie” since from the inception of Night of the Living Dead, “zombie films draw attention to the role of recording and broadcast media” and “place all media under suspicion” (66). However, the undercurrent to all the films—always present but never given central focus in the scholarship except by Laist—is the idea of mediation not just as misleading, but as having the power to zombify the human, which is a central tenet of Diary. Laist is one of the few scholars to discuss the film; he persuasively argues that it “contains some of the most explicit social commentary in all of Romero’s movies” and that it “equates zombieism with the proliferation of new media” (101). His analysis contributes to the current scholarship on Romero by also highlighting the photozombieism of filming—how filmic ‘shooting’ is analogous to the violence of gun shooting and how it has zombifying potential. I agree with Laist on this point, but take issue with his underlying anthropocentric critique: he makes the mistake of reading the film as an endorsement of traditional humanism as an alternative to the persistent eye of the camera and living death via moving images. Romero encourages the viewer to evaluate the frailty of the human subject in Diary, albeit by limited means. That is, Diary still overinvests in the idea that the zombies are us as a way to illustrate that humans are not essentially rational or empathetic, but Romero problematically
provides a context in which he does define the human. In Diary, Romero’s traditionally ideal human is Dr. Maxwell, who is ostensibly anti-technological in his approach to media despite the fact that he teaches film students. As such, his role as Film Professor contradicts his values as the film progresses: that is, Maxwell revels in first editions of literary classics and refrains from using technology himself. The film constructs an ideal humanity that it defines as socially engaged, empathetic, and rational, as if these are qualities that belong only to human animals, and which it laments as being lost in the process of filming. Romero uses this idea as a way of warning the viewer that the human figure is problematic in its capacity to subscribe mainly to racism and classism, and while this is a worthwhile point to be sure, I am interested in demonstrating that Romero’s “they” are “us” thesis is one that is useful but which is now limiting and un-necessarily reductive. Critics of Romero fail to see the posthuman potential in destabilizing ontological boundaries, something that Diary is poised to do. This chapter enables me to introduce the merits but more importantly, the limits of Romero’s anthropocentric “they” are “us” argument in order to move beyond it in subsequent chapters using posthuman theory.

Before undertaking my own analysis of Diary, it is necessary to provide a critical context for the ways in which Romero’s work is read as a sociopolitical commentary on America in current scholarship, which to date quite rightly gives accolades to Romero for revitalizing the sub-genre of zombies in the late 1960s, and details the political importance of his films by examining racism, consumerism, war, and in the context of his zombie films, how quickly human civilization, infrastructure, communication systems, and more would fail in a crisis. Romero attempts to draw viewer attention to the ways in which humans are the real monsters in his films in order to encourage viewers to critically consider the ways that
racism, sexism, speciesism, and classism have been normalized with disastrous results. However, these foci in the films and in the literature ultimately betray an investment in the anthropocentrism Romero attempts to refute when he claims that the zombies are us: in order to make this assertion, both he and the majority of scholars that write about zombie films reify an “us”, a human figure which sets limits for the ways that the zombie figure can be read and understood, that is transparent, static, and ostensibly inclusive, and which must be questioned on the basis of its constituency. In the following section, I want to show that the work of exploring the political and cultural resonance of Romero’s work as a criticism of American exceptionalism and culture has already been done, as has the work of exploring the rhetoric that the zombies are us. What has not been done is an examination of the limits of Romero’s figure of the zombie and the limits of the fantasy figure called the human; how questioning what he means by “us” when he simply claims that “they” are “us” allows for an exposure of the anthropocentric biases at the heart not just of Romero’s canon, but of the zombie film genre in general. In order to move forward with my analysis of the zombie as posthuman in subsequent chapters, I will outline the limits of Romero’s foundational zombies and the scholarship about them.

**Romero’s Dead Films and their Sociopolitical Concerns: Critical Overview**

Romero has single-handedly made a lasting impact on the zombie sub-genre of film. For instance, although Hammer Films’ *The Plague of the Zombies* (1966) was actually the first film in which English-speakers saw the zombie as an abject corpse, it was Romero’s cannibalistic, slow-moving, relentless, and putrefying walking dead in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) that marked the next evolutionary step for the zombie. That is to say, with the

---

introduction of Romero’s zombie figure, Western representations of the zombie slave fell away; Voodoo disappeared, and walking corpses indulged in living flesh and gore: as McIntosh puts it, “instead of a bokor laboriously raising undead servants, the creatures raise themselves. In effect, zombies are now self-colonizing… [t]he master figure is eliminated” (8). For the general populace then and to some extent, now, the figure of the zombie in horror film is defined by the shambling zombie-type made popular by Romero, and which he conflated with the graveyard ghoul that craves the flesh of the living. Moreover, Romero brought his newly imagined cannibalistic zombies—raised not by the magic of a bokor to be a slave, but by infection—from the distant shores of Africa and Haiti to the local landscape of America in Night, the first of Romero’s infamous Dead trilogy, which includes Dawn of the Dead (1979) and Day of the Dead (1985).

Although absent from the subgenre in the late eighties and nineties, Romero released Land of the Dead in 2005, followed by Diary of the Dead in 2008 and Survival of the Dead in 2010. Again, the scholarship to date on Romero’s work is extensive, and most of it tends to read the films as allegory of American society—particularly conservative, racist, classist, or capitalist norms—and the ways in which Romero undermines them by offering political and social commentary in his films. Often read as an allegory of the unstable political and social climate of the turbulent 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War, Romero’s inaugural film paved the way for sociopolitical readings of other horror films. For instance, Night of the Living Dead (1968) is recognized by Robin Wood as a film that undermines the ideological project of the classical horror film up to the 1960s; that is, the

28 Again, Ireland’s Boy Eats Girl (2005) is one notable exception in which Voodoo is responsible for zombification, but its presence is absent from filmic representations for the most part.
unproblematic re-inscription of societal norms—the restoration of the social order (“Normality” 118)—which in Night means the un-ceremonial shooting of the film’s only survivor and African-American character, Ben (Duane Johnson). The subsequent black and white grainy photo stills of his body being dragged by a hook and burned at the hands of white vigilantes at the end of the film does little to provide catharsis and relief in the context of racial tensions and war in the late 1960s. In fact, these images may have been more likely to inspire outrage in audiences who would have been acutely aware of the very real and immediate acts of violence and racism at the time.

For Romero, the idea of restoring order in horror films in the context of bleak times seemed counterintuitive (Birth of the Living Dead). Night in particular conveys the anxieties of life in a time of theological and political uncertainty, especially given its production on “the eve of the Tet offensive in Vietnam” (Maddrey “The Fall of Camelot” 122).29 Shortly after the film was cut, Martin Luther King30 and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, and Maddrey contended that [America] as a nation [is] overwhelmed by faceless, irrational and blindly destructive forces, and [is] incapable of creating a unified front to drive them back” (124). America encompassed “a culture that had a generation of people growing up under the threat of nuclear annihilation and that was coming of age and questioning their government’s policies, as well as their own identities, in the turbulent 1960s” (McIntosh 9). Many people, particularly the young people who were most likely to see Romero’s film, were vehemently

29 Wood discusses how the nuclear family in the film is nowhere near idyllic: the father is an authoritarian buffoon, the mother is sullen, yet remains trapped in the dominant societal expectations of her gender, their daughter becomes a zombie and kills both parents. The heteronormative young couple who would normally ensure a return to normality at the close of horror films is burned alive and eaten halfway through the film (“Normality and Monsters” 115-117.)

30 In fact, Romero relates that King was assassinated while the film was being driven to New York in a search for distributors (Birth of the Living Dead).
opposed to military involvement in the Vietnam War, and the atmosphere was a nation plagued by turmoil and uncertainty. Echoing the despondent assertion of bleak and Godless times in American in the 1960s, *Time Magazine*’s 1966 cover screamed “Is God Dead?” in stark red letters, suggesting after Nietzsche that “striving, self-centered man had killed God, and that settled that” (Shermer). *Time*’s article is symptomatic of the many significant and painful social changes of the 1960s. Shermer suggests that mostly due to secularization, science, and innovative technology, people were turning away from the notion of God in America. Visceral and graphic, *Night of the Living Dead* featured images that invoked the war: according to Sean O’Hagen, “Vietnam became the first war beamed into the living rooms of America, and the images were as raw and visceral as today’s are diluted and controlled” (qtd. in Towlson 108). Christopher Zealand points out that Tom Savini, Romero’s makeup artist for *Dawn of the Dead*, was a combat photographer during the Vietnam War who tried to make his work remain true to the carnage he saw in the field (“The National Strategy” 233). Using documentary realism, handheld cameras, and graphic onscreen horror—including taboos of matricide and cannibalism—*Night* shocked in a way few other films dared to by juxtaposing allegorical moments with real life antecedents.31 As such, Romero distinguished his work by presenting a politicized allegory of Vietnam that resisted media spin and filtering. This approach is inverted in *Diary*, in which the emphasis on media spin becomes part of the film’s politics.

---

31 The film was originally a part of the grindhouse circuit of exploitation films; a drive-in feature, but according to the Adams Theatre superintendent in New Jersey, people saw the film and ran out screaming. Film critic Roger Ebert reviewed the film and wrote that “I saw real terror in that neighborhood theatre. I saw kids who had no resources they could draw upon to protect themselves from the dread and fear they felt” (*Birth of the Living Dead*).
Critics have deftly outlined the ways in which *Night* resonated critically and politically in America, particularly in terms of racism and war. As Towlson outlines, masses of zombies gather at the farmhouse and masses of civil rights activists gather in the streets of America. When Tom and Judy try to fuel up the truck and are engulfed in flames, when Ben wields a torch and Molotov cocktails are tossed at the zombies, the New York *Times*’ image of black men firebombing during the 12th street riots is evoked (111). The context of nationwide conflict was reflected in Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, but not only reflected. In the real world, leftists resisted Cold War conservatism and youth formed a counterculture to the American values of the heteronormative family structure, patriarchy, and the military-industrial complex. Civil Rights, Gay Rights, and Women’s Rights movements mobilized. Towlson elucidates the political tensions in America when he claims that 1967 saw “mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War and race riots in Detroit and New Jersey as a result of the divisive civil rights struggles. Filmed during this time, *Night of the Living Dead* depicts an America where repressive 1950s conservative values have become defunct and dysfunctional, leaving it under threat by a revolutionary new order” (105). As a product of his time, Romero created a film that outlined his own resistance to the status quo; it was a film that frightened and yet appealed to people, perhaps because it was confrontational or perhaps because it sought to understand, in a particular way, events that may have seemed as incomprehensible as the undead returning to haunt the living.

Other critics, like Karen Randell, take a more specific approach to the political investments of *Night*: Randell reads *Night* as a film that articulates the work of mourning in America for the absent bodies of lost soldiers. As she puts it, the film suggests “a traumatic ‘trace’ within the text: a ‘recovered referentiality’ concerning dead and missing American
soldiers (MIA) who fought in Vietnam” (“Lost Bodies/Lost Souls” 72). In Night, the shell-shocked and mournful zombies might be read as the physical manifestation of the missing soldiers of Vietnam, who are like the zombies in that they too are denied a proper burial, and their “bereaved will have to forego the dubious comforts that a funeral service will give” (Night). For Randell, these men are neither fully alive nor fully dead, they are “doubly absent” from America and might be dead in a foreign country: “they persist only in the imagination and memory of their families” (68) and in fact, the filmic archive of horror in the 1980s contains characters that reflect the veteran as zombie. As such, Night’s zombies can be read as the much anticipated and perhaps dreaded return of those lost in the war. For Shane Borrowman, Romero’s films are revolutionary for the way they critique racism in America. Dawn of the Dead (1978) concerns racial tensions, he suggests, when a white police force storms a tenement of Puerto Ricans and African-Americans (“Remaking Romero” 72). Still other critics focus on Romero’s critique of consumer culture: in Dawn, the group of survivors huddling in the mall has often been read as nihilistically representative of capitalist obsessions: the zombies and the living alike are bent on consumption. Brendan Riley concurs that Dawn of the Dead critiques consumerist society, but also highlights the military-industrial complex that influences politics in Day of the Dead.

While Romero’s films express a distrust of the military-industrial complex in general, they are rooted in historicization as well: all of these films make the lack of civil defense

---

32 One of the most notable films that explore the aftermath of Vietnam via zombies is Steve Miner’s 1986 horror-comedy House, in which Cobb (William Katt), a Vietnam War veteran, is pursued by the decomposing corpse of his former friend Big Ben (Richard Moll). Ben is vengeful because Cobb was unable to mercy kill him, resulting in Ben’s capture, torture, and death. The dead soldier of Vietnam in the film literally demands a debt of his still living former friend, who is already tormented by nightmares and PTSD.

33 Racism and immigration in America is explored in Diary, but it is overshadowed by considerations of how the world is mediated.
planning against zombies in the United States painfully clear by directly referencing historical events like the Cuban Missile Crisis. Zealand in particular points out that in Romero films, when the government is involved at all, it is “alternately indecisive and overbearing, contentious, violently racist, dangerously ineffectual, and ultimately irrelevant” (234). In the Dead films, people remain alive not because of the government, “but in spite of it” (237). In Night the media releases contradictory instructions, first expressing bewilderment and disbelief, then instructing people to lock their doors and remain inside, and then telling people to seek the rescue stations of the National Guard. Although largely unexplored in the film, this would have the effect of pushing people into the midst of zombie hordes and ultimately contributing to their numbers. At the end of Dawn, it becomes clear that military and governmental endeavors ultimately fail: they determine that cities cannot be salvaged and must be bombed by nuclear weapons to save the living population; in Day, an attempt to rehabilitate zombies by scientists ultimately fails thanks to failing equipment, an unstable scientist, undisciplined military and authoritarian command. In Land of the Dead (2005) pseudo military units are deployed from the home base of Fiddler’s Green to loot supplies, a plotline that McSweeney equates with the United States’ plundering of resources in the Middle East. Clearly in Romero’s mythology, the medical industry, the military, the government, and the media cannot and should not be trusted or relied upon, particularly given their investment in American exceptionalism and as a symptom of it, racial and ethnic hierarchies.

---

Since 9/11 in particular, Romero’s work has overtly allegorized the attack on the World Trade Center and the “War on Terror” in general. In so doing, he mounts a critique of racism and classism that are at the heart of anthropocentrism. McSweeney reads Romero’s *Land of the Dead* as a case in point: a scathing political film in which the events surrounding 9/11 and the attack on the World Trade Center are blatantly critiqued. Romero frames America as a national graveyard, and McSweeney notes that the title *Land of the Dead* is an allusion to the American national anthem and an attack on the myths at the heart of American culture more broadly, including but not limited to the notion of pre-9/11 America as an impregnable nation, as well as what he calls the “cultural myth” of a classless society (“The Land of the Dead” 109). In the film, the post-apocalyptic and well-fortified city of Fiddler’s Green, which McSweeney dubs an “artificially contrived utopia” enjoyed by a white, privileged, materialistic constituency who “profit from the poverty, deaths, misery, and manipulation of others” (111), is read as an allegory for America as a nation damningly overconfident in its military prowess, situated in terms of classist hierarchy, and experiencing the same incremental fear and distrust of those perceived as ‘others’—ethnic minorities, for instance—that the residents of Fiddler’s Green do. McSweeney highlights Romero’s scathing critique of American intervention in Iraq, which is allegorically dramatized by raids on the zombie-overrun Uniontown. Quite rightly, I think, he claims that it is the zombies in the film that form a cohesive union and inhabit a place whose name suggests unionization and solidarity, while the human colony lives in a state of extreme discontent and class stratification. As such, I would suggest that Romero is very conscious of the way in which this representation of the zombies lead the viewer to question a hierarchy of being based upon American exceptionalism. The film blatantly illustrates a superior military power
overpowering a weaker opponent (zombies), and who, as McSweeney details, relieve zombies of their resources under the guise of needing supplies. These zombies are constructed in terms of race and class; the ‘others’ to the Caucasian, living elite at Fiddler’s Green—or, in the real world, pre-9/11 America—who eventually retaliate against the aggressive invasions. As McSweeney argues, the weakly justified raids on Uniontown allegorically evoke America’s self-proclaimed position as the world police (110), and is quite suggestive in assigning culpability to America for its part in provoking terrorism by sowing social instability or supporting dictators in the Middle East and by appropriating, in subtle and overt ways, resources such as oil in the region. Even more suggestive is the invaded tower at the epicenter of Fiddler’s Green, which according to McSweeney, corresponds to the Twin Towers and is run by a ruthless, classist CEO named Kaufman (Dennis Hopper) modeled after a combination of George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld (111). Hopper decided to deliberately “‘play him like Rumsfeld,’” to which Romero replied, “that’s what I’m going for—the Bush administration” (“Undead Again: The Making of Land of the Dead” DVD Special Feature). Allegorically, then, we might say that Romero uses the zombie apocalypse as a way—albeit limited—to critique the Bush administration, but more importantly, Land invites the viewer to question Kaufman as the film’s only representation of a self-appointed and worthy human subject.

Overall, Romero attempts to undermine the white, upper class, American male as the default human subject—sometimes subversively and sometimes overtly—by collapsing the differences between this subject and the zombies that often represent ethnic minorities. McSweeney notes this development to some extent in Land, in which the undead are led by

---

36 See McSweeney, 110.
an African-American zombie named Big Daddy (Eugene Clark) who begins to evolve, organize, and think, all while helping the others to do so as well.\(^{37}\) As McSweeney points out, this development makes it near impossible to distinguish humans from zombies (110), or to put it another way, the film blurs the boundaries between the coveted position of “us” who belong, and “them,” who do not. The zombies of \textit{Land} are represented as socioeconomically inferior, racialized, but passive figures, who attack the living only after much antagonism. The zombies are cast as sympathetic figures rather than monstrous others, a portrayal that, when viewed in the context of the zombie’s real life antecedents (racial minorities and terrorists both real and perceived), begs the question of whether non-westerners or even America-born ethnic minorities can be conveniently scapegoated as terrorists or worse: non-human others threatening the safety and national security of the United States. Further elucidating the political critique of Romero’s work, Lowenstein argues that “Romero sees Kaufman’s establishment of a society that refuses to reckon with the true nature of the zombie crisis as mirroring the Bush administration’s posture toward terrorism, where the problem is functionally ignored through what Romero calls ‘living around it, and profiting from it’” (112). The eventual invasion of Fiddler’s Green suggests that America too might pay for its war-mongering, and that its own citizens might already be paying. Much as \textit{Night} invokes the missing soldiers of Vietnam, \textit{Land} uses the Latino character Cholo (John Leguizamo) who is trying futilely to secure a place in Fiddler’s Green by doing raids on Uniontown and catering to Kaufman, to acknowledge the plight of American soldiers: Cholo “embodies the tragic position of rank and file American soldiers in Iraq. Like Cholo, these

\(^{37}\) Romero has said in the DVD featurette “Undead Again: The Making of \textit{Land of the Dead}” that Big Daddy is the next step up from Bub (Sherman Howard), the zombie who begins to be “reformed through media experiences” (Cameron 69) as he relearns how to interact with books, a tape recorder, and a razor and regains some semblance of intelligence, much like Mary Shelley’s creature in \textit{Frankenstein}. 
soldiers are often non-white and working class. They fight and die for an authority that disrespects them through dishonest arguments concerning the reasons for their sacrifices” (Lowenstein 112). McSweeney and Lowenstein make clear that Land, the immediate predecessor to Diary, might be considered the most politically scathing of Romero’s films since Night of the Living Dead, particularly given its emphasis on racial and class hierarchies in which zombies and ethnic others are conflated.

The scathing political critique of Romero’s films demonstrate his disdain for a hierarchy built on American exceptionalism—which nevertheless favors only certain Americans—and so there has been obvious merit in discussing Romero’s foundational zombie figure and foundational zombie films in the interest of destabilizing or questioning the legitimacy of a hierarchy built upon being American, male, white, and upper-class. That is, exposing and undermining anthropocentric hierarchies in Romero’s films has always involved the rhetorical claim—which he frequently makes and which is comprehensively discussed in the current body of literature on zombies to date—that “they” are “us”. This claim is meant to collapse the distinction between the human and the monster, which in turn enables viewers to consider how humans are wholly responsible for committing atrocious acts of racism, sexism, classism, and speciesism that are foundational for anthropocentrism. The problem with an equivocation between the zombie and the human in Romero’s canon and in the literature on zombie films to date is a glaring and significant oversight: if “they” are “us”, then as I mentioned, it follows that there is an “us”—a human figure—that is intrinsically true, transparent, uncomplicated, inclusive, and upon which we can all agree. In other words, grounded in both the current literature and as an undercurrent in the films themselves is a humanist, anthropocentric bias in how the zombie figure in film has thus far
been read. This chapter is poised as a point of departure from the tendency in scholarship and in the genre of zombie film towards anthropocentrism and a reification of the human. I continue my discussion of *Diary of the Dead* with attention to the limits of simply claiming that the zombies are us, since this unchallenged bias forecloses productive discourse about how the zombie figure is evolving.

“The Camera Sees, and What the Camera Sees the Audience Sees”: Media as Meaning-Maker

In the context of how images are framed, cut, lit, and oriented to a film-maker’s representation of the world, *Diary* draws viewer attention to the un-reliability of images in the news, in Jason’s film, and in *Diary* itself. It also forces us to acknowledge as viewers that because of the often invisible framing structures of film, our interpretations of ‘reality’ are filtered and always skewed via representation. At the turn of the millennium, the relationship between people, media, and communication technologies had changed drastically. No longer limited to the already ubiquitous influence of radio and television, people are acclimatized to a steady stream of technological innovations that allow the continuous exchange of information via cellphones, the internet, YouTube, blogs, and ever-present cameras—including smartphone cameras and video cameras—that are readily available to the public at large and ensures that virtually anything can be captured in the moment, with or without the subject’s consent, and transmitted instantaneously. Emphasizing the framing of life through a camera lens gradually dissociates the person filming—and the audience who watches the finished product—from themselves; they merge with and take on the objective vision of the camera.
Diary highlights the amateur film or digital short as a vehicle for infectious ideas that are “ready for download or immediate viewing (on a Flash Player, for instance)”, but it also stresses the realism that is taken to be transparent is actually very much constructed. The amateur film or digital short is “effectively a new genre, and one uniquely tailored to the audience expectations of the Millennial Generation” (Dendle 180). In Diary, the means of communication—predominantly social media and civilian video recordings—are indeed tailored to a generation immersed in digital forms of communication, which at first glance are championed in the film as authentic conveyors of reality or truth. This claim to truth and reality is contentious in that social media posts and especially videos are all framed, and are thus always already biased and manipulated. As Jean-Louis Comolli asserts, “the very fact of filming is of course already a productive intervention which modifies and transforms the material recorded. From the moment the camera intervenes, a form of manipulation begins” (qtd. in Lapsley and Westlake 158), and is used to great effect by those in positions of authority. Diary in particular draws viewer attention to the conventions of filmic representation and the arbitrariness of claims to truth and reality in all cases, which in turn applies to the definition of the human that emerges in Romero’s film.

The first mention of zombies reaches Jason and his friends not through television and mainstream news, but via walkie-talkie. When he travels to the University of Pittsburgh to check on Debra, he finds her watching an onslaught of new reports via media players on her PC as opposed to the television, even as the audience watches them both through the lens of the Panasonic HDX 900 Jason sets on the bed but never turns off to preserve a private moment. Rather than rely on the information stream from news networks, Debra, Jason, and increasingly survivors at large use the internet as their source of information and
communication. Debra will later inform the viewer via voiceover that once the media and its power and influence are gone, only the “kids,” “hackers” and “bloggers” remain, as if they and their data is somehow more truthful than the data from large institutions. The group finds some of the only useful advice available on YouTube from a Japanese woman who says that it is “very bad” in Japan and that survivors should shoot the dead before burial: from this Debra gleans that anyone who dies will come back to life. For Romero, this means of virulent information is perhaps no less dangerous than the erroneous and conflicting instructions given by major news broadcasters in *Night of the Living Dead*. He contends that the news and official networks of communication are controlled and spun, but now there is “freedom but no management and it’s not even all information, a lot of it is opinion, viewpoint. And I don’t know which is worse” (Romero qtd. in Keough 165). This new technology, and a reliance on it, reveals its own limitations that in turn have dire consequences for members of the group in *Diary*.

Reliance on representations that are necessarily fallible and limited increasingly lead the protagonists of *Diary* into misleading and perilous situations. Because they are frozen in a particular moment in time and are sometimes delayed or lost due to network issues, communication technologies such as instant messaging that one assumes to be real-time and instantaneous, up to date and ‘true’, are not to be trusted. For instance, Debra tries in vain to contact her family by phone and is later relieved when she receives a text from her brother who assures her that they have been camping in Virginia, are fine, and are on their way home. Debra is mistakenly convinced that the information is still current; she tells Jason the message was delivered to her phone the night before, and takes this as proof that her family is still alive. Upon arriving home, Debra discovers that her family is dead and reanimated. It is
obvious to the viewer that the text her brother sent could have been prone to delivery failure and delay, miscommunication, or, most likely, outdated information. Debra fails to realize that there are framing structures at work in the technology she uses that create a representation, not a reflection, of her concept of social reality. A similar over-reliance on the notion that “seeing is believing” has disastrous results for Jason and Eliot (Joe Dinicol) midway through the film when they establish a video chat with friends Ridley (Philip Piccio) and Francine (Megan Park). In contrast to Jason’s scared and terrorized group, Ridley and Francine have champagne in hand, are in a warmly-lit room, and appear oblivious to the horrors of the outside world. Jason and Eliot’s ability to hear and see their friends via camera makes the safety of the encounter all the more convincing. In the confines of the camera frame, which constructs a fantasy of safety, Jason and Eliot only see what the camera allows them to; they accept the representation they see onscreen as both transparent and—erroneously—unmediated. As Jason tells his makeup artist Tony earlier in the film in another context, “the camera sees, and what the camera sees the audience sees.” Despite Jason’s awareness as a filmmaker that the audience sees only the world inside the camera frame, he and the others are drawn to Ridley’s by the lure of safety only to discover that the family gates and the front door are ajar, Ridley’s entire family and house staff, as well as Francine, are zombified and trapped in the pool, and Ridley himself has been bitten. Despite the ominous implications of the open doors and later, Ridley’s strange behavior, Jason trusts what the cameras shows him rather than his own vision and, one assumes, his critical thinking skills. Mediation here constructs how the characters erroneously interpret the world. When Debra expresses concern at the open gate, Jason naively responds that Ridley and Francine were fine when he last saw them online and ignores her reasonable suggestion, her
interpretation—based on her own traumatic realization that social media is not reliable—that being fine hours ago does not guarantee safety in the present moment. From the opening of the film, Jason is inclined to trust the ‘reality’ within the confines of the camera frame, and his unwillingness to accept that Ridley’s well-being may have changed confirms Debra’s earlier criticism of him when she says that for Jason, “if it didn’t happen on camera, it’s like it never happened.” For Jason, the camera alone is the arbiter of what is true; this implies a turning away from affective engagement with any event that happens off camera and between cuts and will eventually lead to Jason’s complete dissociation from anything or anyone outside the world he sees in the camera.

Romero dramatizes an incapacity for autonomous critical thought: individuals rely on the television that tells them what to do and who to believe, much like the Haitian zombie relied on the orders of a bokor. In *Diary*, Romero stresses the tendency for people to believe whatever they are told on the news; the film also emphasizes rapid images of violence and conflicting media voices, and particularly images of disaster. Jason and his friends spend three days downloading images of suburban houses burning, riots, and the chaos of hurricane Katrina while voices fight for authority: we hear a voice claiming there is an epidemic while another argues that it is a “ridiculous hoax” akin to Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds*...people, he asserts, will believe almost anything. Tony echoes this conclusion when he points out the media’s fear-mongering. Arguing that they hear accounts of dead people and other calamities every day—a bomb dropping on the White House, terrorists, a virus in the water supply, or a slowly heating planet—Tony concludes that the news

38 See Romero quoted in Keough, 165.
39 This particular focus at the outset of the film—with all of its preoccupations on mediated crisis as well as the din of voices that distract from some topics and attract attention to others—could be viewed as a precursor for the similar visual investment in media cacophony in *WWZ* (2013).
promotes fear in order to “sell soap” and is “always horseshit.” By contrast, Eliot believes the announcement, taking the very medium of dissemination for a guarantee of truth when he tells Tony to “shut up” because “it’s on the fucking news.” In this case it happens to be true that the dead are rising, but despite Romero’s claim that people are uncritical in their evaluation of media, *Diary* hinges ironically on the expectation that viewers will engage critically with how Jason, Debra, and film medium in general represent the world. Romero’s word here is also not to be trusted; he stresses the unreliability of news broadcasts and of his own authority when later in the film, he appears in a cameo as a General who puts a ‘spin’ on news footage of dead people returning to life that was uploaded in the raw by a Channel 10 cameraman. This moment suspends viewer disbelief by inserting the auteur—a teller of visual tales, and as such, always already suspect as far as truth is concerned—into the narrative as an authority figure. For fans of the genre who recognize Romero in this scene, the rhetorical point of placing him as a false authority figure is well-taken: Debra and Jason note that the original footage has been doctored to support ‘General Romero’s’ attempt to diffuse and obscure the reality of the zombie apocalypse. Romero signals to the viewer in this moment that visual media in particular is constructed for a political purpose. As Lapsley and Westlake elucidate, a realist text—such as, but not limited to, a news broadcast like this one in the film—has a “unique, epistemic status: it represents things as they are, it claims to tell the truth”(156).

The political purpose of realism is a point emphasized in the film. For instance, the college students see a newscast on television via which they learn that Homeland Security has raised an orange alert despite their claim that there is no terrorist attack; that there are only isolated incidents. The severity of the orange alert suggests just the opposite, but relies
on the continued gullibility of the general population to accept the story they are presented with. In general, Debra observes that the din of information from both official channels and online resources only serve to cause confusion and increase panic: she says most of it was bullshit and none of it was useful. Romero is represented as the “arch-deceiver” who “infects the movie as a whole with forgery” (Laist 110), and this representation also draws the viewer’s attention to the un-reliability of the narrator and director. As such, we are to be as suspicious of Jason and Debra as we are of Romero. For instance, Debra tells us that in the film we are about to view, she has “added music for effect” because “in addition to telling the truth, I am hoping to scare you, so that maybe you’ll wake up.” Telling the viewer this undermines her own loyalty to truth while affirming that this film, like all visual media, has an agenda: in this case, to “scare” viewers into “waking up” from their own complacency in consuming media without critical thought, and by using emotionally affective music. In short, Debra frames *The Death of Death* as a means by which she might spark an emotional response in her viewers, but her means are just as disingenuous as the media and news industry. Further, the viewer is left to question the veracity of a film diary, since a diary implies a necessary indulgent and biased subjectivity; a glimpse into something that is private, personal, honest, and presumably not meant to be made public. Reading a diary, or in this case seeing a diary, means to do something illicit and involves a transgression similar to photographing or filming someone without permission. This contention is fraught, however, by the fact that we know Jason and Debra intend for their “diary” to be seen by as many people as possible. The effect of a diary in the age of social media is inverted: rather than composing something private and getting upset when someone transgresses that privacy, one posts their ‘private’ and personal experiences in the hopes of getting clicks, likes, and views
that culminate in making one’s “diary” go viral. Although Jason argues that he intends to disseminate the unfiltered, transparent ‘truth’ in his film, the fact that he constantly edits the footage before uploading makes clear that despite his realist approach, he too is subject to creating a biased interpretation of events. From a structuralist approach, there is no reality for representations to correspond to, and “realism…shows itself to be neither window nor mirror, but a set of conventions” (Lapsley and Westlake 158). In effect, the film’s content and its sincerity must be called into question if reality is always already mediated and meaning-making is created by film conventions. For instance, as Debra codes Jason’s film as a horror movie with music, she emotionally manipulates the viewer. Moreover, her voiceover interjections that contextualize the images the viewer sees creates a dominant narrative in which she attempts to assume full authority over what those images are supposed to mean. As Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake suggest, “narrating discourse appears to provide the truth, to render the real transparently” (171). As such, Debra’s voiceover becomes what Lapsley and Westlake call a “dominant discourse that functions as a metalanguage” that is used to unify and frame “contradictory discourses” (171), such as the array of news footage and recorded images in the film itself.

Debra’s final editing of the film indicates a kind of violence in the cutting of shots and conversations, selective omission, and a resulting lack of integrity of the film. Another instance of this occurs in an early scene in the Winnebago: Debra responds with disbelief and hostility to Jason’s insensitive, intrusive filming and obnoxious questions towards her and their companions, after which a series of rough cuts prevents the viewer from seeing how the argument plays out. The film commences a few moments later, suggesting that despite Jason’s claim that he wants to tell the unfiltered truth, the obvious off-camera argument
between Jason and Debra does not fit his script, and so he (or Debra) edits it out. In essence, the film we are watching is understood to be found footage, and we are also implicated in our willingness, if not eagerness, to consume images of pain and suffering. Although Jason sees the documentation of the groups’ experience as a necessary means of un-mediated truth-telling—that is, the problematic idea that film can represent a pre-discursive reality with absolute transparency—his film is tempered at all times by a meta-narrative couched in several layers of representation: Jason’s vision is directed into the comforting and distancing frame of the camera window, and the footage Debra shows us from other sources is itself being viewed through several lenses, bouncing down a distorted and endless hallway of funhouse mirrors that refract rather than reflect any claim to truth. Romero, I would argue, is endeavoring in this film to point out the signs of production in film that are normally effaced in order to demonstrate that truth and reality are in themselves relative and fraught terms, although he fails to realize that the most basic premise of his film—that there is a human figure that is dehumanized or zombified by technology—is similarly constructed and fraught; another claim to truth. With this in mind, I suggest that if truth and reality cannot be authenticated, then determining any ontology becomes problematic in Romero’s film.

The Zombifying, Dehumanizing Eye of the Camera

The point of reflection that is germane to Diary is an echo of Romero’s assertion—typically voiced by at least one character in all his Dead films and in Diary by Debra—is that it “used to be us against us. Now it’s us against them. Except they are us.” She does not employ the familiar rhetoric that there is always an “us” against “them” scenario, but contends that a scenario in which us against us—or rather, the living against the living—remains the case no matter who or what we might try to re-cast as an enemy, a sub or non-
human, an other. *Diary*, like all Romero’s films, is problematically invested in exposing the shortfalls of the human subject by highlighting the ease with which we turn on each other in the interest of survival. I say problematically because while Debra’s words here have the effect of turning the mirror back on the viewer; confronting them with their own image, the film is still equating the zombie with a constructed figure of the human. Belaboring the point that we are not meant to read the humans and zombies as separate entities is the fact that Romero’s characters cannot seem to help thinking of the zombies as humans: Mary attempts suicide after she runs down a severely burned and clearly dead state trooper and is unable to see the act as anything but a murder. When Gordo kills the zombie nurse, patient, and doctor at the hospital, he exclaims in shock and horror that he “killed three *people* tonight” (emphasis mine). In the last scene of the film, Debra describes in voiceover how two redneck men kill people—she does not use the word ‘things’ or ‘zombies’—for fun. It seems then that Romero is suggesting that the reflection we are seeing when we watch this film is of ourselves as we really are: zombified ghouls who callously and ravenously devour images of suffering and cruelty online, if not outright participating in them. As I will discuss, there is an inherent logical flaw in claims to who or what we really are.

In *Diary*, Romero frames Jason Creed as an example of how technology has a zombifying or dehumanizing effect by implying that by relentlessly filming his friends as an objective observer, Jason becomes less human. This is problematic because to claim that technology dehumanizes is to suggest that there is a human to dehumanize, and as I have been arguing, the human is a fantasy figure that is constructed rather than tautological. Via Jason, Romero constructs an ideal of the human that is grounded in empathy and uses the camera as a way to facilitate the loss of this ideal, which he then laments. Because Jason’s
actions are increasingly motivated by his desire to record an impartial, objective, and somehow ‘true’ account of the zombie-apocalypse from his own perspective—that is, one determined by the objectifying frame of the camera and not by worry, fear, concern for others, or even self-preservation—Jason becomes anesthetized in the process of filming; increasingly distant from his friends and girlfriend, and transformed by having a video camera become enmeshed in his identity. From the moment Jason positions himself behind the camera, it is he who becomes living dead. Using and becoming one with the camera suggests an ontological blurring between it and Jason, and between Jason and the un-dead. Via Jason and his friends, Romero constructs a social reality in which rationality and empathy are supposed to define the human, only to use Jason’s dissociation from the others—a process that will come to affect all the characters in the film—as a means to suggest that the human is something entirely less idealistic. While Romero clearly insists that zombies are us, there are moments that suggest that what we are is not as easily determined as he would have us believe.

Following the found-footage style of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)—in which student documentary maker Heather (Heather Donahue) becomes increasingly unable to function without her video camera as a buffer between herself and the outside world when she and her friends become lost in the woods—Jason uses the camera as a tool via which he attempts to take an objective stance that ostensibly gives him control over his situation by allowing him to enter a supposedly safe state of filtered ‘reality’. Much like the photograph, the video camera becomes “a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power” (Sontag “In Plato’s Cave”8). Sontag asserts that “like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive” and that rather than being a tool for unmediated
documentation, “a camera is … a predatory weapon—one that’s as automated as possible, ready to spring” (14). Asserting this power, however, means objectifying his friends and girlfriend, turning them into props and characters in his documentary/monster movie; he invades their privacy and disregards their concerns by allowing himself to become anesthetized to their emotional trauma by filming.

For Jason, the camera is represented as zombifying as it dulls his emotions and severs his connection to life on the other side of the camera lens. In one scene, Jason becomes lost in a dark warehouse where a zombie is wandering, and eventually stumbles upon and is frightened by his own reflection—camera poised to shoot—in an old mirror. He does not recognize himself, but just sees what his friends presumably see: a humanoid figure, its eyes glued to the window of the camera perched on and fused to its shoulder like a malignant unblinking Cyclop’s eye. Laist claims that this moment attests to Jason’s lack of humanity, which is encompassed by his continued separation from his companions and the events around him by filming and is implicated when Tony finds him and says “‘There’s a dead man walking around here, let’s go’—a line which seems to refer doubly to the literal zombie on the loose and Jason himself, who is so mesmerized by gazing through the camera lens that he has wandered away from other human beings and into the darkness” (109). Laist does not seem to notice the relevance of the double reference here as an opportunity to read Jason and the zombie as doubling in the context of mirroring. I would argue that Jason is not only

---

40 This convention is used liberally in any number of films and novels, particularly of late in the horror genre. For instance, in Scott Smith’s novel *The Ruins* and the 2008 film of the same name, one of a group of college students snaps photos of a group of Mayans who are forcing them at gunpoint up a hill, making her feel somewhat immune to the situation. In *The Blair Witch*, Heather maintains a precarious sense of calm and control until Josh makes her the subject of the camera’s gaze; in *Cloverfield* (2008) Hud (TJ Miller) unwillingly films goodbyes for his friend’s going away party and continues filming when a monster attacks New York. In all these examples, people are consistently filming and being filmed; their lives mediated.
seduced and mesmerized by the camera, but that the camera also becomes an augmentation and extension of himself, and he cannot seem to put it down even as he stares at himself in the mirror. Romero presents this moment as a way in which to equate Jason, without a doubt, with a zombie. In this moment Jason has had to literally reflect on his own image for the first time in the film: to actively confront his anesthetization to those around him, to see himself as a mere representation rather than as an individual inside, as opposed to an objective observer outside, of his constructed virtual reality. He has to briefly acknowledge the monstrousness of his appearance and the monstrousness of the act of visually cannibalizing the events around him, which he feels compelled to do. However, this moment of awareness is fleeting: although Jason registers fright at his sudden reflection long enough to put the camera down, he slowly lifts it to film it as part of his reflection. Much like Narcissus from Greek mythology, Jason is mesmerized by the reflection of himself with the camera as extension. Resonating uncannily with the idea of the camera as anesthetizing and also with this scene, Marshall McLuhan writes that Narcissus is “from the Greek word narcosis or numbness” and that the “extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions” (“The Gadget Lover” 45). For Jason, like Narcissus, the camera as mediator (like the surface of the water in which Narcissus sees his reflection) becomes deceptively transparent, and he is called by its lens into a different and liminal state of being: as Marina Warner claims, “the story of Narcissus’ death anticipates many later superstitions about doubles, or ‘fetches’, uncanny spectres who call the living into the land of the dead. A reflection, caught in a pool or a basin of water, could be fatal to the soul (173). When Jason catches his reflection in the mirror, camera poised in front of his face, he is similarly called from the land of the living—the social ‘reality’ his companions are living in without a camera—to the land of the dead.
This is a moment in which Jason is forced to confront his own zombieism, to see himself as increasingly other than the ideal human Romero constructs.

The shadow world of film calls Jason into a land of photo-zombieism and a fun-house hallway of endless mirrors, but although he is confronted by the fact that he is becoming anesthetized by the camera, Jason seeks to make his liminality final: in his mortal struggle with zombie-Ridley, Jason reaches for the camera that he has dropped—not to protect himself, but to preserve himself as the living dead on film and not to miss the shot. In so doing, it is clear that Jason now willingly forfeits life—signified by a form of traditional humanism that Romero defines as empathetic—and chooses death or un-death instead of joining Debra, Dr. Maxwell and Tony in the panic room. When Debra pleads for him to stay with her and to “settle for life. For survival”, he agrees but ultimately wanders back to the zombies. Here, Jason chooses to abandon the conventions of social relationships in order to live on in film. He claims that “all that’s left is to record what’s happening for whoever remains when it’s all over.” Throughout the film, Jason recedes further and further from the living world and from the lived, social ‘reality’ in which he would respond as a full participant to what is happening to his group, and toward a shadow world of representation. In an effort to film everything, Jason demonstrates that framing the world through a camera has a zombifying and anesthetizing effect.

One scene in the hospital emphasizes that filming is stripping Jason of the empathy that, as Romero problematically constructs it, makes him ‘human’. To attribute empathy to the human is a problem in the film at large because empathy is represented as that which is robbed from Jason, and others, as they become zombified. As such, in Diary the loss of empathy is mourned as the loss of something distinctly human, which occludes that fact that non-human animals too are capable of empathy.
from representations rather than ‘reality’, where everyone is merely an actor in his narrative. By reality here, I mean what might be called the most important political construction, the social ‘reality’ that constitutes lived social relationships. In effect, Jason rejects social conventions that encourage him to respond appropriately, that is, with care, concern and empathy, to what is happening to his friends. At the hospital, for instance, the group goes in search of a doctor for Mary (Tatania Maslany) after she shoots herself in the head but remains alive. Demonstrating a lack of concern and empathy for his dying friend, Jason remains alone at an electrical outlet because his camera battery is dying. Refusing to help, he tells a disbelieving Debra that “he can’t leave without the camera. It’s the whole thing.” He ignores subsequent off-camera gun shots and screams, and when Debra walks back into frame after nearly being killed by a zombie, she videos Jason with her own camera in a vain effort to make him understand the inherent invasiveness and aggression of the gesture, understandably upset that her life—given that she is his girlfriend—means less to him than the camera. Debra sees that by filming her, Jason has negated her understandable fear and her ability to express the seriousness of what is happening to her and to all of them. Moreover, she is responding to Jason’s lack of empathy for her and for their friends.

The film provides many instances that emphasize how the camera deadens the person filming, how it strips dire situations of urgency. For instance, Tony is attacked by a zombie in a warehouse and scrambles to find a weapon and kill it while his group and armed former members of the National Guard watch him with interest but do nothing to help. As Debra cynically observes in voiceover at another point, when we see a traffic accident we “don’t stop to help, we stop to look”. Indeed, while Tony frantically uses a jar of acid on a zombie, Jason films him from one side while Eliot films him from the other: both seem nonplussed
that their friend’s life is in real danger. They bear some resemblance to those who take war
photography. Sontag points out “how plausible it has become, in situations where the
photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph” (12),
to get the shot at the expense of the subject if necessary. We see this same scenario enacted
earlier, when Gordo is fatally bitten by a zombie and then cradled, bleeding, by his distraught
girlfriend while Jason and Debra watch from behind the lens of their respective cameras.
They insidiously and digitally consume Tracy and Gordo’s plight. As Sontag explains,
photography “is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on
to keep happening…to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth
photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person’s pain or misfortune”
(12). This tendency towards the consumption of often personal, traumatic images leads Debra
to observe that “those of us in the media put ourselves ahead of what we see happening
before us,” and to ask, “is it your job as a journalist to keep shooting?” Realizing that she is
intruding on the couple’s private and personal pain, Debra discards the camera in disgust,
echoing Maxwell’s discomfort with a gun by claiming that the camera is likewise “too easy
to use.” It is just as easy to point and shoot, just as easy to distance oneself from the physical
reality of pain for the subject being ‘shot.’ Implicit in these instances is an anthropocentric
tension that provides a false dichotomy for viewers: either the human is essentialized as an
ideal subject defined by a capacity for empathy that is lacking in other living beings, or it is
essentialized as a subject that is predisposed to the exploitation and or consumption of
suffering. In other words, Romero makes clear that there is already a pre-disposition to look,
to film, to acknowledge that there is something always already present in the human figure
that makes the camera or the gun “easy to use.” To suggest this is to also imply an always
already flawed human subject, but in introducing the idea of blurred boundaries between human and machine, zombie and human, there is a missed opportunity to move beyond a reification of the human. The blurring of boundaries suggests that the human and the zombie might be synonymous, but also that it is increasingly difficult to define what they actually are. This liminality is again stressed later in the film, when Jason is bitten by a zombified Ridley and is clearly dying and infected. Jason asks Debra to shoot him, but he means with the camera rather than the hard and final end that a gun promises. Jason knows if his death is filmed, he will be immortalized. In this moment, Jason has in fact become a zombie long before Ridley’s bite can physically bring him back from the dead, but his digital zombification heralds an ontological uncertainty. Debra claims that she does not want to become Jason, zombified and objectified by the camera, but *Diary* actually seems to suggest that the ‘truth’ of the film is that the objectification and subsequent visual cannibalization of others’ suffering is a well-established practice in a media-saturated society.

*Diary* ominously portends the way that mediated zombification is contagious, particularly when Debra draws a link between Jason’s behavior and the behavior of the general public, and is then consumed by the compulsion to film herself. Noting that there are “200 000 000 video cameras in people’s hands worldwide”, Debra concludes that millions are “compelled,” almost against their will like Jason himself, to broadcast their views. Despite making this observation and serving as the harshest critic of Jason’s inappropriate filming, Debra becomes infected by Jason’s obsessive need to document ‘the truth’ after he dies. Although she berates him in the hospital for not responding to her screams, her first response when their fight is interrupted by a re-animated corpse is to ‘shoot’ it with a camera. When Jason dies, she becomes even more determined to finish and upload his film and
begins to mimic his obsessive behavior. In a scene near the end of the film in which only Debra, Maxwell, and Tony remain alive but trapped in Ridley’s panic room, the viewer sees both Debra and Tony succumb to the contagiousness of filming. When Maxwell says something Debra considers insightful, she asks him to repeat it for the camera because she did not get it. Maxwell responds not by repeating his words, but with a knowing but strained half smile: he is likely recognizing that Debra’s request to repeat something for the camera is not a new occurrence; it was what Jason did as he gradually withdrew from his friends into the world of his documentary film. This brief exchange between Debra and Maxwell signals that Debra too is enmeshed in the world represented via the camera lens, whose mechanical eye has become an extension of her own, but also the means by which she begins to change. When Maxwell directs Tony and Debra’s attention to the surveillance monitors in Ridley’s panic room, where they see the undead infiltrating the mansion, Tony and Debra both have cameras mounted on their shoulders. In this moment and the ones that follow, neither Tony, Maxwell, or Debra express emotion, and at this point we are given to understand that only the cameras and monitors create meaning; Debra quickly stops mourning Jason’s death and becomes obsessed with filming. In the panic room, she and Tony point their cameras first at one another and then at the many screens and thus continue to see through several layers of representation. Entombed in a room filled with surveillance screens, two cameras, and two converted, digitally zombified college students, we can assume that Maxwell will be exposed and overcome by the soft murder of the camera, either as filmer or viewer, at last, thus effacing any hope of re-establishing humanity or the virtues of humanism we might read in Maxwell.
Ultimately, Laist’s reading of Maxwell as a humanist figure resistant to the pull of technological zombification/dehumanization serves as a springboard as to why I argue that Maxwell’s ostensible position as a fully human only emphasizes how completely the human subject and anthropocentrism is effaced. Laist can hardly be blamed for this reading, since Romero’s narrative is constructed in such a way as to lament a figure of the human that he defines as rational, empathetic, and pre-technology, a figure that becomes altogether cruel, apathetic, and dissociated. Romero implies that there is something essential in ‘human nature’—a fundamental empathy that he implies is only available to humans in the first place—that is lost due to using technological tools as extensions of the self, but there has almost never been a time when humans have not used tools and later media, as Marshall McLuhan has argued, as a means to extend our senses, nerves, and consciousness. Further, Romero’s suggestion that there is a ‘real’ human essence of any kind seems to work against his implicit critique of mediation as transparent in Diary, since the human in his film is also necessarily a construction. In some sense, film has its own language, and as Lapsley and Westlake observe, structuralists argue that reality is constructed within language, in the sense that all thought about the real world occurs through signifying systems (166). They suggest that “this is the sense of Lacan’s statement that the world of words creates the world of things… [and that] our experience of reality can never be pre-discursive” (166). Within the language of Romero’s film, then, the viewer is engaged in a discourse of reality, and “[a]s Lacan maintains, any attempt to formulate or return to a pre-discursive reality is itself routed through discourse. Given this orientation, then, realism could only be a construction, never a reflection” (qtd. in Lapsley and Westlake 166). As Romero defines and then redefines a

---

42 See McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.
human subject in the film through realist documentary film-making, it is clear that there is no 'real' antecedent for the figure he constructs. In Dr. Maxwell and in the final scenes of the film, there are further opportunities to see the failings of humanism and the human subject.

Dr. Maxwell: Last Stand of the Human Subject

From the beginning to the end of Diary, Dr. Maxwell plays a clichéd role as patriarch, authority, and full human subject who notably rejects the camera and other forms of communications technology in the film, as if to remain uninfected by them. Laist claims that the camera does not devour what it feeds on and films, but infects the subject and forces him/her to live on in “a new ontological register defined by the implosion of the values of life and death” (103). This is a point that is certainly relevant in that the camera zombifies as it anesthetizes, but falls short of the mark when Laist falls back on an old “ontological register” that locates humanism—represented by Maxwell—as an option or alternative to the living death of film. In his analysis, Laist reads Dr. Maxwell as a “preserve of humanism that stands apart from the posthuman, hyperreal zombieism that overwhelms the rest of the movie” (111); a “caricature of all of the values that are being and have been replaced by the YouTubificaton of society” (111). I think that Laist is partly right here; Maxwell certainly aims to maintain his humanist preoccupations, as is demonstrated by his love of tangible and ‘slow’ forms of knowledge that his college students view as antiquated. Upon discovering Ridley’s parents’ extensive and rare collection of first-edition texts, he exclaims, “Good Lord! Treasures…absolute treasures,” while his companions ignore his excitement. Further, it is true that Maxwell actively refuses to participate in Jason’s photozombieism and the general use of technology in the film. Maxwell represents a nostalgia for traditional humanism that Romero defines ostensibly in terms of pre-digital technology: he accepts that when he
physically sees a zombie he is seeing a reflection of the human, and that if he holds a camera, he is participating in his own zombification and the zombification of his subject. In addition, rather than rely on the distorting weapons of the camera or handgun to ‘shoot’ subjects, he prefers weapons that lend themselves to hand-to-hand combat, an actual physical engagement with the enemy that resists physical, emotional, and psychological distancing from killing: he accepts a bow and arrow rather than a handgun, and kills the zombified Ridley with an antique sword. Interestingly, he claims that the use of the former seems “friendlier somehow” than a gun, perhaps because it demands a physical engagement with the enemy that acknowledges their subjecthood—or even objecthood—in a way that the “soft murder” of a camera shot or the “hard murder” of a gun-shot disallows. Having gone to archery school, Maxwell is well-versed in the use of weapons and speaks with haunted gravity about wartime and killing. The viewer is never really clear on his past, but Maxwell understands too well the implications of shooting with the camera or the gun. He gives the latter to Tony in one scene, claiming it is “too easy to use”.

Although he teaches film studies, Maxwell neither accepts the video camera nor uses a phone or the internet, and, therefore, epitomizes the figure of the traditional humanities or social sciences academic—resistant to digitized media and presumably its related evaluation platforms. Laist concludes that Maxwell appears to be inoculated against the digital zombieism that overtakes his companions from the millennial generation by virtue of his literary and historical inclinations (111). I take Laist’s point, particularly since it is clear that Maxwell understands the escapism and distancing inherent in media, which is reflected in Eliot’s hope that Debra’s little brother has a Playstation, and later when Debra tries to convince Jason to join her in the panic room and exchange the fantasy world of the camera
for the fantasy world of gaming: “we can play Nintendo until the whole thing blows over”, she tells him. Laist is correct insofar as Maxwell “appears to be inoculated”, but as I have suggested at length, Diary’s very form tells us we should be wary of appearances: Maxwell does, ultimately, end up locked in a room full of monitors and cameras. While Laist points to Maxwell’s weapons proficiency as another indication that he has somehow retained his humanity (111), he does not trouble the implications of ‘humanity’ or ‘humanism’ that he attributes to Maxwell as an academic invested in traditional knowledge on the one hand, and an experienced killer on the other.

The ‘human’ is a designation rooted in essentialist and exclusionary ontology, and Maxwell is a caricature of that as well. A Professor Emeritus, retired but marked by high rank and distinguished service, Maxwell meets all the criteria for the default human subject: he is white, British, and male, thus epitomizing, albeit anachronistically, the rigid and gendered hierarchy of the traditional academy and of the human species. I say anachronistically here because Maxwell’s penchant for swords, crossbows, and Charles Dickens mark him as a sort of conspicuous Luddite despite the fact that he embodies forms of high culture. His tastes and preferences may be read as entitled and self-indulgent despite the heroism he displays in killing zombies and despite his preference for actual—that is, physical and classic—books that are themselves part of an elitist, racist, and sexist canon. Maxwell exudes classism when he complains drily about living in a new world where “a gentleman cannot find a bottle of bourbon” and being demoted to “steerage” – the bathroom of Mary’s Winnebago—when the toilet is the only throne left for him to occupy. Laist reads Maxwell’s eventual fate: being entombed alive with Debra and Tony in Ridley’s panic room—and in proximity to the Utopia of classical literature-lined shelves—as a “literary
humanism [that] represents a possible alternative to the epidemiology of moving pictures and living death” (112), but this conclusion is too optimistic. After all, the texts are located on the outside of the panic room, just out of reach, while the panic room itself is lined with countless surveillance monitors that force all three survivors into seeing through a camera lens and being infected by its voyeuristic pull. Presumably, Maxwell, Debra and Tony will all die at some point inside the panic room, living on only in video. To my mind, there is no appeal to a traditional humanism here but rather the suggestion that it lives on in a state of panic in the face of its imminent demise. The film itself does not end here, but with Debra now obsessively finishing, editing, and uploading Jason’s film, which we have just viewed in its entirety and in so doing, reanimated Debra and her friends and all the other people and situational footage in the film over and over, as many times as there are people to watch it and subsequently be infected by it. That is to say, Diary parallels the etiology of zombie viruses in other films—organic viruses, for instance—with technological infection: visual consumption of images are dangerous in their ability to infect or curse those foolhardy enough to watch. Pricilla Wald reminds us that “[t]he image of contagion does not have only pejorative associations. The word originally was used to describe the rapid circulation of ideas” (qtd. in Vint 139), implying that the sharing of information—digital and otherwise—has the ability to infect and contaminate thought. The information being transmitted in the film seems itself labored, sick, and infectious. For instance, at various points in The Death of Death, there are blurry, pixelated or lined images, as well as flickers of white noise, static, and blank screens that first present themselves in Jason’s film and then engulf the viewer’s screen. Citing the poor quality of images on YouTube, Cameron writes that “the lost resolution and dropped frames provide not a remedy but the image of a shared media
sickness” (87), one that is aesthetically reflected in the final scene of the film and signals that digital zombification happens all around us, lending new meaning to the phrase “going viral.” Ultimately then, the point is not that Maxwell stands as a beacon of humanist hope, although it is understandable that one would think so since *Diary* has the effect of making claims about the ‘essential’ human.

Romero’s focus is on collapsing the distinction between human and zombie in order to suggest that “they” are “us”, and that the concept of the human as rational, co-operative, and emotionally engaged with the suffering of others is one that is being lost. He uses technology in *Diary* as a new way in his canon to explore the limits of the human figure by replacing it with what he takes to be the ‘truth’ of human interaction at its worst: racism, cruelty, individualism, and apathy. The issue is that Romero falls back upon a reification of the zombie and the human as analogous figures. More, he suggests a false binary: humans are good versus humans are bad, when on the contrary, the entirety of *Diary* indicates that claims to truth based on realism are suspect at best, especially Romero’s own. As Lapsley and Westlake suggest, “any realist work … and none more so than films, with their remarkable power to effect belief in their constructions, has political ramifications. Cinema provides a sustained assertion, or a variety of assertions, as to the way things are—socially, politically, economically, internationally, and so on” (157). In *Diary*, the viewer is still led to reflect on the ‘reality’ of a certain kind of human figure, rather than the idea that the human figure itself is contentious and under duress in a time when how humans interact and merge with their machines—much as Haraway has argued—itself calls such reification into question.

The “us” versus “them” argument is an important one. It is also reductive, although not necessarily so. While positing that the zombies are us, Romero does neglect to question
who “us” is, but the medium of his message—the video camera—.opens a critical space for a much more nuanced argument about how the image of the living dead on film invites a consideration of the camera not only as an extension of the human, but also as a device that implies ontological uncertainty for both the zombie and the human. Despite the restrictions *Diary* imposes in terms of reifying the human, the motif of filming and viewing creates a state of ongoing, liminal living-death that suggests the figure of the zombie—which as simultaneously living and dead presents an ontological paradox—and the figure of the human by extension may be more complicated than Romero allows.\(^{43}\) I would point out that despite the problematic reification of the human that occurs when Romero frames technology as dehumanizing, there is posthuman potential in recasting the means of zombification in terms of technology, which encourages an ontological blurring between human and machine. When Haraway claims that humans are the products of our “situated relationalities” with tools (“When we Have Never Been Human” 146), she indicates that by way of these shifting relationalities the human can never be a single, indivisible figure; we are never fully human in the sense of what Braidotti refers to as the classical ideal of man [*sic*] and bodily perfection that traditionally defines the human (“Post-Humanism: Life Beyond the Self” 13). In *Diary*, ‘human’ relationality with the video camera as mediating tool hints at a new way of seeing the human as augmented by as well as enmeshed in the practice of filming, so that the line that separates man[*sic*] from machine is blurred. This is a consideration Romero does not explore as fully as he could have, but I would argue that the action of filming and viewing creates a state of ongoing, liminal living-death that prevents a reification of the figure of the

---

\(^{43}\) The next chapter I will detail the implications of the zombie as ontologically indeterminate and as a posthuman figure in and of itself that transcends Romero’s “us” versus “them” rhetoric. Here, I am focused on pointing out that his view of both zombies and humans presents a limitation, but one that the focus on the video camera partially transcends.
zombie—which is already paradoxically living and dead in a way that resists ontological determination—or the human.

Jason is so enmeshed in his filmic representation of the world that the camera eye metaphorically and seamlessly melds with his own; it is not just an extension of the self but a means by which the leaky boundary—in Haraway’s terms—between the human-animal and the machine are transgressed. He becomes a liminal figure much the same way that a zombie is, and is every bit as emotionally void and focused on ravenously consuming; although for Jason, he is hungry for visual images rather than flesh. I would suggest here that the conflation of Jason and a zombie does not necessarily signify that there is evidence of an empathetic human lost, or a monstrous human gained. Rather, there is no self-authenticating process that is not touched by interpretation. Jason’s appraisal of himself in the mirror only clarifies that as a zombie or human, as a human/machine hybrid, or as a representation or reflection, he has an indeterminate ontology, even though the film continues to assert a reification of the human/zombie.

The zombie is a liminal figure between the states of life and death, which implies its own blurred ontology, and with camera as mediator, the filmed subject is likewise caught in a state between living and dead. Laist argues that “it is the movie camera that has always been ultimately responsible for bringing zombies to life, or at least, to what simulacrum of life they manage to achieve” (103), and this a point well worth taking. The zombie is predominantly a filmic figure, one that rises from the dead with every viewing, and if the zombie shambles between the worlds of the living and the dead and refuses ontology, the

44 See “A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.”
same can be argued of the ‘humans’ that are filmed and digitally zombified in Diary. Laura Mulvey argues in a different context that the arrival of digitization “marks a moment in which the aesthetics of both the photograph and the virtual are characterized by liminality, meeting at an in-between threshold of uncertainty” (qtd. in Sassatelli 135), and in this assertion the same characteristics that I have been using to discuss the zombie and ontology are present. In fact, film and photography lend themselves to the uncanniness of living death. To explore the nuance of the posthuman zombification that occurs via the process of filming, I will turn to a scene near the beginning of Diary in which Debra introduces herself and her companions. In it, Debra explains the specs of Jason’s documentary, particularly that she did the final edit and added music for effect in the hopes of scaring the viewer out of complacency. During her voiceover explanation, the viewer is introduced to each of Debra’s college-companions by turns, and to Debra herself, in a series of darkly lit close-ups that are cut from later moments in the film to come, and in a sequence of dissolves that give each person a phantom-like quality as their images fade into one another. Aside from Jason, they are not introduced by name, and their movements are so minimal that the viewer could almost be looking at still photographs. The music Debra has chosen to accompany the images of herself and her friends has a haunting, ominous, and sorrowful quality, and all of these elements come together in such a way as to give the impression of seeing people as if they are eulogized and memorialized; as though the viewer is seeing the uncanny, embalmed images of living people who are already dead, even as their images, still vital and ambulatory, contest this.

To build on the connection between photographic images and un-death is Roland Barthes’ fitting comment on the essence of photography, which he says is “‘[t]hat rather
terrible thing that is in every photograph: the return of the dead’” (qtd. in Mulvey “The Index and the Uncanny” 60). Indeed, as I elucidated earlier, by the time the viewer reaches the end of Diary of the Dead they can be sure that those introductory and vital images of Jason, Eliot, Ridley, and Mary are moments suspended in time; viewers see them living and yet, they all die onscreen over the course of the film. Presumably, Debra, Tony and Dr. Maxwell are also dead by the time the viewer sees the film, and yet they too are trapped in the footage, never aging, living on digitally even though their physical bodies are dead. Like Romero’s typical zombies, they all become dead bodies who paradoxically and disturbingly remain in motion.

In many cultures the photograph has been feared as having the ability to steal the soul of the subject: “shadow-catchers, soul-stealers, face-takers, shadow men, photographers have been called, in different parts of the world, by various fearful names” (Warner 189). The concept of stolen souls resonates strongly with the figure of the zombie, which is likewise imagined as an empty shell whose soul has been unhoused, so that applying this notion to the images of Jason and his friends implies that capturing their images condemns them to digital living death. These caught images are re-animated every time they are re-watched, re-consumed, and re-animated. Pointing out how film and photography crosses boundaries that are often taken as givens, Laura Mulvey observes that “[u]ncanny feelings are aroused by confusion between the animate and the inanimate, most particularly associated with death and the return of the dead. The photograph’s suspension of time, its conflation of life and death, the animate and the inanimate, raises…a sense of disquiet” (“The Index and the Uncanny” 61). In Diary, the sense of disquiet created by immortalizing and thus zombifying the college students in the film’s opening sequence is created because blurring the lines between movement and stillness and between life and death via video camera ultimately suggests the impossibility of
zombie and human ontologies that are rigid and fixed. Rather, it is because the result of
digital photographic and film technology suggests in the film is that there is no real or true
human figure to appeal to—technology is a means by which that figure is shown to be
malleable, fragile, and subject to posthuman becomings.

“Are We Worth Saving?”: Final Footage, Finite Humans

The YouTube clip that Debra includes is the last thing that Jason downloads before
his death: a black and white clip of two “redneck” hunters making targets out of zombies for
fun. Debra says the final target, a female zombie tied by the hair from a tree, is special. The
men shoot her in the lower face, deliberately leaving her brain intact, her eyes still staring,
one of them leaking blood like a teardrop as Debra rhetorically asks the audience, “are we
worth saving?” If we read the zombie’s dripping eye as a tear, we are forced to engage with
the zombie as complex; as capable of regret, sorrow, and suffering, not as just as a thing or
an object. As such, the image resonates with the plight and suffering of non-human animals
that are subject to the self-congratulatory exploitation visited upon them by hunters who pose
with their mangled bodies and ignore their suffering. Like this zombie, non-human animals
too are often understood in this context as things. The zombie in this scene seems to mourn
its fate as a subject to the ongoing cruelty of the living: here is soft murder and hard murder
as she is shot with both a camera and a gun; her humiliating experience is shared with any
who care to watch online. Indeed, the image of this last zombie that is now little more than a
pair of endlessly staring eyes seems to hold the viewer accountable for their own complicit
consumption of images while asserting that pairs of zombified eyes are what the consumers
of such images have themselves become. The format of the video alludes to the fact that in
addition to the two rednecks, a third person was present safely behind the camera to
document the cruelty, and all three considered the content to be amusing enough to share their afternoon entertainment with whoever is left to consume it. Laist comments that the audience “participates in the cannibalism of the camera…to watch sadism is to become a sadist” (110), and the visual consumption, the feasting of the eyes on this horrific image, implicates the viewer of images that particularly and gratuitously feature pain, suffering, and humiliation as a glut; a ghoul consuming images and re-sharing them until they become ‘viral.’ The implications of this are even more insidious when we consider that the film we are watching, Jason’s *The Death of Death*, has come to us via the logic of the film in the same way that the YouTube clip has, and via a similar pretext: Jason has shot what Dr. Maxwell calls a “diary of cruelty” that capitalizes on the suffering and pain of others, and Debra completes and uploads it for the repeated visual consumption of still others. On the other hand, I would argue that Romero’s goal in this scene, and at the end of the film, is to expose the viewer to images of suffering in order to wake them from the conditional, ethical blindness that comes with accepting, for instance, the killing and consumption of non-humans as normative: for instance, the undercover filming of animals that suffer extreme cruelty at factory farms is meant to raise awareness, to galvanize activists and whistle-blowers, and often does so.

The title of Jason’s film can be understood in the way that film and photography lend themselves to immortality by freezing their subjects and making them available for repeated viewing; death has essentially lost meaning and has itself died. The black and white footage gives the impression of an aged news-reel; the compulsion to look is central to other forms of news media past and present—particularly those images of human loss and disaster such as the black and white news footage from Vietnam that critics say *Night of the Living Dead*
invoked so strongly, the footage of Hurricane Katrina—itself politically loaded in its recollection of the mismanaged, racialized crisis—and 9/11. The scene is very self-reflexive: its depiction of the woman hanging from a tree invokes the lynch-mobs of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the more sporadic lynchings in the late 1960s and the final scene of Night, in which Ben is shot by the sheriff’s own band of redneck volunteers, who appear to be enjoying the task of killing zombies a little too much. In the Netflix documentary Birth of the Living Dead several commentators observe that in Night, the scene in which white, redneck men with dogs hunted down zombies invoked the nasty allusion to black men who were chased by dogs prior to the abolition of slavery in the southern states. Such men took pleasure in both hunting and lynching, and according to film historian Mark Harris, were “exactly the kind of victor you were inclined not to root for” (Birth). In Diary, we are confronted with the same ‘protagonists’, who are meant to embody the cruelty and voyeurism of our species in Romero’s framework, and we are given to understand that in 40 years precious little has changed, although the final zombie with her mouth violently destroyed suggests that it is women in contemporary times that are dehumanized and silenced.

Moreover, questions of moral responsibility tempered by the vindicated enjoyment and visual documentation of suffering in this scene cannot help but recall the photographed torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. As Adam Lowenstein elucidates, “the torture of the female zombie by a band of smiling rednecks eager to post their handiwork on the internet evokes the photographs that exposed the Abu Ghraib torture scandal (April 2004) as well as the widely

45 See Laist, 110, Karen Randall’s “Lost Bodies/Lost Souls: Night of the Living Dead and Deathdream as Vietnam Narrative”, and Jon Towlson, who claims Night of the Living Dead “comments self-reflexively on the influence of television images in the social-political upheaval of the 1960s. In “The final scenes in the film, which were all hand-held,” Romero remarked in 2010, “I was trying intentionally to make that look like the news that we were seeing, from Watts [the Los Angeles riots of 1965], from ‘Nam”’ (106).
publicized mutilation, burning, and hanging of bodies belonging to American contractors hired by Iraqi insurgents in Fallujah (March 2004)” (119). In Diary and with these contexts of racial hierarchies in mind, Romero asks viewers to question what it means to call themselves human, and thus to question how human subjectivity has come to be defined for Americans in American historical and cultural contexts in the past and present. Again, however, his resonant films continue to suggest that there is an authentic human subject, while I contend that the human is neither natural nor authentic, but an historical construct. With its references to Night of the Living Dead—including the isolated mansion that parallels the abandoned farmhouse, Ridley and Tracy’s re-enactment of Barbra’s flight and stumble when pursued by the shambling graveyard zombie, and the final black and white scene that echoes the one in which Ben is first shot, hooked, and burned by rednecks—Diary attempts to re-familiarize the viewer with the rules of Romero’s zombie mythology, but more importantly, to remind them that for better (or usually worse), in the words of Dawn of the Dead’s Peter, “They’re us.” Again, the claim that zombies are us and vice versa is reductive in that despite strides to frame the zombie in a new way in the context of documentary filmmaking within his own canon, Romero mostly succeeds in reifying the human and suggesting its limits; particularly—as in the examples above—in terms of racism. This is, to be sure, a useful observation worth theorizing and which has motivated productive reflections on how one defines human, and how that definition can and has justified terrible crimes against others. That said, claiming that “they” are “us” tells us they, as much as we, are living-dead, and prompts us to consider how the zombie’s liminality, its uncertain ontology, reflects on a similarly uncertain ontology of the human that implies, via the use of technology in Diary, that the zombie can be a posthuman figure. Thus more than simply a figure of humanity’s
failure to act as anything reasonable and indeed humane, the zombie presents the possibility that we have never been human.

Echoing his own sentiments about the tendency for contemporary zombies to be fast, Romero uses a scene in which Jason—a young, independent film-maker and horror aficionado like Romero himself—chastises Ripley about his mummy performance in order to have the final word on the subject: “how many times have I told you? Dead things don’t move fast. You’re a corpse for Christ sakes. If you run that fast your ankles will snap…the script says the mummy shambles.” Romero is doubtless owed a great deal of debt for jumpstarting the zombie subgenre of horror film, and has provided in *Diary* a timely and sobering exploration into how new media zombifies, anesthetizes, and inoculates viewers and film-makers alike against everyday horror and devastation. However, part of the problem in the current cultural moment is the urge to follow a set “script” and rulebook about zombie ontology and behavior. As technological innovations increase and facilitate a culture obsessed with speed and mutability, Romero’s slow zombie paradigm seems out of touch with the times. Romero’s *Dead* films are departures from the non-cannibalistic zombies of films made in the 1930s and 1940s, and thus it is counter-productive to subscribe to one way of reading zombies that locks us into a totalizing narrative with immutable meaning. For Romero, the focus has always been the failings of the human, but he still assumes, as do scholars working with his film canon, that these are terms that are easily and transparently defined and understood. In *Diary*, the notion that to be human is to be self-centered, obsessed with consumption, and apathetic prevails. Romero portrays an America that cannot communicate, that is entrenched in outdated family and institutional structures, and that fails to rise to the divine and benevolent expectations of American exceptionalism. Thus, the film
reveals itself to be so enmeshed in anthropocentrism that it never thinks to ask who or what
the human is, or what it might mean to be able to apply or withhold the term to others. In
other words, Debra’s question at the end of Diary, “Are we worth saving?”, still assumes that
there is a definitive figure called the human with a human essence, even if for Romero that
essence is more about ferocity, selfishness, and violence than the altruistic, divinely granted,
and intellectual essence endorsed by classical humanists. Diana Fuss points out the
“Aristotelian understanding” of essence as "that which is most irreducible and unchanging
about a thing” (4). Increasingly though, theorists such as, Braidotti, Derrida, and many others
trouble and deconstruct the human subject and the idea of essence using posthumanist theory,
which I will draw on in Chapter 3 and extensively in Chapter 4.

As a figure that shambles haphazardly over the line of living and dead, sometimes
standing on it and at other times more one than the other, the zombie is a mutable figure, one
that not only critiques social and political institutions while reifying the human as it does for
Romero. Although Diary is the closest Romero has come in his films to suggesting that there
is posthuman potential in zombies, the film oscillates uneasily between the capability of the
video camera to facilitate the becoming of a posthuman subject and the reification of a non-
idyllic human subject. I argue that the contemporary zombie that is situated in the context of
rapid-fire technological innovations and an ever increasing focus on speed and immediacy in
Western society serves to trouble the integrity of the human subject. If Debra is asking if the
human subject—that familiar creature from the Enlightenment period who is able bodied,
white, male, heterosexual and so on—should be saved, contemporary zombie films, possibly
withstanding WWZ, seem to say no. Romero’s zombies are foundational and pivotal in any
study of zombies, but at this juncture his work is a point of departure for my own
investigations into the genre, during which I endeavor to move the discussion beyond an anthropocentric analysis that assumes, like Romero and like many scholars who discuss his work and the zombie genre of film in general, that the figure of the human is ontologically stable. My goal moving forward is not to discover a new ontology or tautology for the zombie or the human, but to explore posthumanism as an approach that reveals that discovering and pushing past the limits of the human figure is the new ideological project of the zombie film. I have detailed that while Romero critiques the legitimacy of a hierarchy built upon American exceptionalism, he has not critiqued or acknowledged the fantasy figure of the human that underwrites it. It is with this omission in mind that I turn to World War Z (2013) in the next chapter.
Chapter 3 The War on Zombies: Ecological Crisis, Human Hierarchy and American Exceptionalism in World War Z

“The problem with most people is that they don’t believe something can happen until it already has. It’s not stupidity or weakness, it’s just human nature.”

-Max Brooks, World War Z

Based on Max Brook’s popular novel World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War, Marc Foster’s World War Z (2013) is one of the most recent additions to the filmic zombie archive; a blockbuster film that promotes America-centric imperialism and human exceptionalism. The film chronicles the mission of United Nations operative Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt) as he traverses the world in search of the etiology of a zombie pandemic that threatens to eradicate governments, armies, institutions and nations; in other words, the infrastructure of human societies and humans themselves on a global scale. In my estimation, the zombie is a formidable threat to human existence in the film but more importantly, to the anthropocentric human figure which presumably takes precedent over the environment, other species, racialized others, and women. WWZ46 assures the viewer that despite these threats, handsome all-American hero Gerry Lane will inevitably find a way to save the world.47 WWZ positions Lane as the epitome of the human subject in form. That is, he is fit, Caucasian, conventionally handsome, able bodied, male and heterosexual. He is also ideal in deed and nationality—Lane’s centrality as the only ‘complete’ human being is emphasized again and again through scene lighting and the way in which he is predominantly center-screen—

46 To avoid confusion, from this point on the abbreviation WWZ will be used to reference the film rather than the novel.

47 One of Hollywood’s most well-known stars, Pitt is recognized as one of the most handsome men on-screen. His eclectic filmography and versatility have allowed him to play romantic roles (Legends of the Fall (1994) and Interview With the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles (1994)), hyper-masculine roles ((Fight Club (1999)), action-based heroic and suave roles (Troy (2004), Mr. and Mrs. Smith (2005)), and many others. His appearance and film personality prime Pitt to represent the ideal figure of American masculinity in WWZ.
creating a patriotic, gendered, and racialized hierarchy in the film that reifies American exceptionism and re-affirms the nation’s moral and military superiority. As such, the film seems to push against the more general ideological project of zombie film, which from Romero’s Living-Dead trilogy onward has been to destabilize the status quo and to chip away at the cornerstone of conservative horror: the sanctity of the heterosexual couple/heteronormative nuclear family and the repression of collective fears such as nuclear and viral threats are just a few. In Night of the Living Dead (1968) for instance, Romero creates fissures in the filmic convention of the triumphant nuclear family: Barbra (Judith O’Dea) is killed by her zombified brother, and Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman) is a stereotypical, self-righteous and ultimately ineffectual patriarch whose daughter not only becomes a zombie, but kills her mother. Often, as with the racial and class stratification that is hyperbolized after the zombie apocalypse in Land of the Dead (2005)48, the stealing of resources from other survivors in films such as Diary of the Dead (2008), the grotesque sexism in DeadGirl (2008), and numerous other examples, zombie film uses the apocalypse as a background against which the failings of humans and human societies are highlighted.

Insofar as the subgenre offers a counter-narrative to conservative norms and narratives, Aayla Ahmad argues in a similar vein that “the cultural aftershocks of 9/11 revived apocalyptic disaster and war film genres, shone a spotlight on imperialist aspirations and disrupted the dominant narrative of the United States as an infallibly virtuous superpower” (“Gray is the New Black”132). By contrast, WWZ appears to reinscribe the virile white American male as a cornerstone for human excellence, and America as a benign and righteous superpower and defender of human life. However, the definition of human life in

48 In the fortified city of Fiddler’s Green, ethnic minorities are deprived of the luxuries Caucasian characters enjoy.
the film is part of the problem when as I argue, only Lane is represented as being fully human.

It is a significant development that WWZ—a film that is at its core steeped in American exceptionalism, nationalism, and idealism on a global scale—appears 14 years after 9/11 to reimagine the zombie subgenre of horror film in the context of pro-American propaganda and with an A-list star that none of the other films in this project rely upon for their credibility and affective impact. Zombie film is a subgenre which has become even more cynical, apocalyptic, and critical of American ideology around capitalism, war, race, gender hierarchy, and exclusionary claims to humanity since Romero’s work in the late 1960s. What, then, might this film be trying to accomplish? On the one hand, one could say that it attempts to capitalize on a highly successful film genre—not to mention the best-seller status of Brooks’ novel—and that WWZ attempts to appropriate the zombie film in the service of belaying or denying future terror or terrorism in the United States by re-asserting within the film that the nation is heroic; a galvanizing global force that is capable of leading the planet in the defeat of zombies (terrorists). In WWZ, the United States is superior even to the United Nations, which despite providing the resources for the execution of Lane’s mission must rely on America and Lane to save the world. The focus on American courage, perseverance, leadership and capability has an affective purpose: to re-assure post-9/11 Americans that no matter what the threat, their country will emerge strong and victorious. Moreover, in order to do so, it dehumanizes many of those outside American borders in the

---

49 Later chapters will explore the ways in which key zombie films produced since the attack on the Twin Towers undermine corporate capitalism, the development of bioweaponry, and especially humanism in a predominantly America-centric context. WWZ appears to be a contradiction to zombie films that, like Romero’s Living-Dead trilogy (as well as the Dead films that follow it), criticize American ideology and threaten that it will inevitably come crashing down. However, it subversively underscores the racial, national, and gendered stratification that it purports to ignore in favor of American exceptionalism.
interest of national security. On the other hand, *WWZ* also paradoxically undermines American exceptionalism and the figure of the human—which the film so explicitly defines as male, Caucasian, American, and so on—while simultaneously underscoring the ways in which privileging that figure leads to the horrific and normalized dehumanization of most other characters in the film. In both the film and Brooks’ novel—which I shall occasionally draw on—there are subversive ripples that give way to an undercurrent of ecological ambivalence, questionable human exceptionalism, and racial hierarchies that trouble the simplistic narrative of humans, and only “real” humans, at that, pulling together to save the world. Thus, I argue that *WWZ* is not about zombies, but assumptions about what it means to “be human” in a framework that identifies Lane as the only human, and largely by virtue of his race, gender, and nationality, to the exclusion of all others. As such, *WWZ* is a film that allows for a critical engagement with such questions while insisting on an imperial theme: the triumph of Lane, of America, and of humanity. To date, there is a tendency by scholars to determine the ontological state of the zombie figure in order to more firmly reify a tautological conceptualization of human being that finds its ideological underpinnings in anthropocentrism. For instance, take Sarah J. Lauro and Karen Embry’s observation that due to its inability to think, reason, and speak, “the zombie emphasizes that humanity is defined by its cognizance” (“A Zombie Manifesto” 90). More pertinent to *WWZ* is Margo Collins’ and Elson Bond’s spurious claim that in uniting survivors and bolstering their will to pull together, the zombies force them to “become, in a sense, more fully human” (“Off the Page” 190). Collins and Bond are writing here about Max Brook’s novel *World War Z* in particular, in which the human survivors eventually push back the zombie hordes and reassert their dominion over the earth, but although Collins’ and Bond’s article comes from an anthology
about zombies as posthuman figures, their thesis clearly endorses the perseverance of the human figure in an un-critical way that takes what it means to be a human for granted in discussions about zombie film. They argue that “ultimately, modern stories reflect our fear of loss of identity” (204), as though ‘identity’ itself can be understood as a stable and individually determined quality. As a film, WWZ also seems to endorse the human, but I argue that it also, perhaps unintentionally, opens up a space where one sees—through the representation of Lane in particular—that the human is a constructed and exclusionary category but also that humanism and terror are complex aesthetic projects that open the floodgates for interpretations and misinterpretations over which the film loses control. In other words, despite WWZ’s orientation towards normative and conservative ideas of American exceptionalism as representative of the truly human, the film fails to contain ideas about the fragility of the human and anthropocentrism that it attempts to disavow.

**Ecological Crisis in WWZ**

The opening montage sequence of media images and audio voiceover news reports in the film have a decidedly ecological focus; one that warns about human complacency regarding delayed but incremental environmental destruction and yet simultaneously and paradoxically privileges an anti-environmentalism and humanism that weaves its way through the rest of the film. The sequence gives the impression of sensory overload and a relentless onslaught of television and radio images that the viewer is forced to endure, and which suggests that what passes for social life—apathetically lived via technology and media—is a kind of living death for viewers. The peaceful establishing shot of the sea rolling onto a deserted beach is succeeded by clouds, sunrise over a metropolis, suburbia, and people

---

50 See Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human.
in various countries traveling on departing planes and scurrying across busy streets, down escalators, and off of subways on their morning commute. Interjected clips from banal American talk shows—one woman comments that the socks of another are “so cute”—emphasize the din of trite and self-indulgent media which in turn contextualizes the status quo of a busy human world grown complacent in its routine and which is able, for a time, to ignore the cumulative effects of environmental deterioration with the assistance of the media. The film’s opening creates a sense that, as Cory Doctorow observes in considering media culture, “we live in an era where the electronic screen has become an ‘ecosystem of interruption technologies’” (qtd. in Nixon 13). In other words, the continuous influx of visual and aural information onscreen and online facilitates continuous but partial viewer attention so that pertinent information is often lost in the context of trivial entertainment and stimulation. Rob Nixon argues that “the attosecond pace of our age, with its restless technologies of infinite promise and infinite disappointment, prompts us to keep flicking and clicking distractedly at an insatiable—and often insensate—quest for quicker sensation” (8). Nixon’s idea of rapid-fire sensation resonates strongly with WWZ’s opening sequence as more upsetting images and sounds that increase in speed and intensity proliferate on the viewer’s screen.

The onslaught of visual images provide an accompanying sense of panic, confusion, and the impression of a closing window of opportunity to act before it is too late. The viewer must actively struggle to hear the important news as voices and images struggle for authority: lost in the cacophony a reporter warns of dramatically increasing carbon dioxide levels and a news report graphically details the death of dolphins which are stranding themselves for no apparent reason, yet when asked if there is “any real threat,” a television personality pauses
momentarily before stating “not at all.” Contradicting this assertion is another shot of beached dolphins and the words of an apparent specialist who claims that naysayers to real ecological threats are “not physicists, they’re not engineers; they think it’s just going to go away. They live in a fantasy parallel universe.” Experts, the clip insinuates, are ignored in favor of more comforting but less reliable sources: a clip of Asian commuters preoccupied by their smartphones emphasize the lack of attention given to real threats that are constantly minimized even as things worsen, so that when yet another earnest man claiming that talk of doomsday is all a big hoax appears onscreen, the viewer is made aware of the doubt created by conflicting views on global warming and geological/ecological changes. As Morton argues, climate change is neither visible nor tangible, but arguments over its existence situate it in the human realm, where it manifests as apocalyptic (“The End of the World” 100). The denial of ecological trauma by some commentators in WWZ’s opening sequence represents the trappings of becoming so invested in arguments about its existence that nothing is done, and no progress is or can be made. Implicated in the reports of increased viral transmission, dying animals, and carbon dioxide emissions in the sequence, however, is the undeniable impact of human activity on the planet: for instance, atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen coined the notion of the “Anthropocene Age,” which he used to theorize “the massive impact by the human species, from the industrial era onward, on our planet’s life systems, an impact that, as his term suggests, is geomorphic, equal in force and in long-term implications to a major geological event” (Nixon “Introduction” 12). Morton discusses phenomenon in the context of hyperobjects51, the encroachment of which has already brought about the end of

51 Defined as “things that are massively distributed in time in space relative to humans” (“A Quake of Being” 2), for instance, biosphere, evolution, climate change, and geological cycles and forces. These include human intervention on a global scale, such as the terraforming of the earth and the depositing of carbon into the earth’s
the world, which he argues is merely an “aesthetic construct” (106). In these terms, the opening sequence can be understood as a harbinger for the end of humanity and of the Anthropocene; this interpretation is one that the film attempts to ignore and undermine without much success.

Highlighting the fragility and the likelihood of human expiration on earth is the viral/zombie threat itself, warnings of which are drowned out: a radio broadcast warns of what is presumably the zombie virus, which “changes in a way that allows transmission between humans”; we hear reports of “strange behaviors” and the fact that the health department of the United Nations has no plans to limit international travel, against the images of people wearing surgical masks—later Lane is informed by his superior and friend, Thierry Umotoni (Fana Mokoena) that the airlines were the “perfect delivery system” for the virus. As such, the role of technological and communication advancements on the globe cannot be underestimated in its ability to spread and transport the viral threat; however, when attempts are made to warn or prepare the population, they fall on pre-occupied and distracted, rather than deaf, ears. For instance, early in the film while Lane and his family are stuck in a gridlock in Philadelphia with countless other civilians who are blissfully unaware of the zombie threat, they miss a radio report of an outbreak of supposedly human rabies in crust, as well as the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. See Morton, 5-7. See also Braidotti, The Posthuman, for a fuller explanation and examination of the Anthropocene.

52 While not pointed out in the limited scholarship on WWZ to date, it is significant that its initial scenes occur in Philadelphia, which in 1793 was the “temporary capital” of the United States and “its largest, most cosmopolitan city.” In addition, it was the site of “the first major epidemic of yellow fever in the United States”, for which the cause and cure was elusive, and which caused death in a matter of days: by November, four months after the onset of outbreak, “one-tenth of the city’s residents had died and over 17, 000 others had fled the city” (Foster ix). Thus, Philadelphia has long been associated in the American imaginary with illness and national degeneration.
Taiwan. Lane, his family, and the other residents of Philadelphia are so fixated on their impatience, inertia, and curiosity about the stagnant traffic that they all miss the already too late warning that a viral threat is imminent. Later, Lane eventually makes his way to South Korea to investigate the first mention of the word “zombies” that was relayed to the United States in a memo, only to be told by Captain Speke (James Badge Dale) that it was an email, and one that obviously nobody who received it bothered to read. WWZ is pointed about the lack of concern and preparedness for both attacks on the ecology and the newly defined global ‘homeland’ that constitutes humans against zombies. Perhaps nodding to the general ineptitude of governments to prepare for, recognize and take seriously potential threats, the failure of American intelligence to read Speke’s email is a familiar theme in the wake of 9/11. As Christopher Zealand argues, “before the attacks, intelligence was ignored or misunderstood. During the attacks, official communication and co-ordination were lacking. The only effective anti-terrorism force on 9/11 was a group of ordinary citizens aboard a commercial flight over rural Pennsylvania, who prevented certain disaster at the cost of their own lives” (237). In WWZ, Gerry Lane and his ever-shrinking entourage are likewise the only people on earth who manage to save humanity, emphasizing America first and foremost as world savior. While he and his team do have military support from the United Nations—his family is protected by the Navy, he has the use of a satellite phone, and is transported primarily by military plane—Lane is pivotal in achieving the United Nations’ objectives.

The viewer knows that the concept of “world” as defined by humans in the film is fragile, since he/she knows the narrative will ultimately lead to the near-devastating global

---

53 The popular notion in zombie films of the millennium that a form of human rabies is to blame for zombification can be traced to 28 Days Later. A thorough analysis of this particular cause for infection is explored in Chapter 5, although it is true that infection is referenced in a plethora of zombie films released after the year 2000.
assault by zombies. Indeed, the coming zombie pandemic in the film suggests that the zombie is itself a hyperobject; an embodiment of ecological threats that has ramifications on a planetary scale and which would otherwise seem slow, imperceptible, and even negligible. This is particularly important since the threat in WWZ is sudden and immediate because the zombies are frighteningly fast and do not allow for any kind of thoughtful, planned response. Thus, they emphasize that after a prolonged period of exposure to cacophonous news and entertainment media, in which real and imminent environmental and ecological threats are revealed but not taken seriously, there is suddenly no time to act. Calling for the representational intervention of slow violence, Nixon argues that shape and form must be given to formless threats that are dispersed against space and time and which have mortal repercussions. For Nixon, “amorphous calamities” must be embodied by iconic symbols in narratives that stress dramatic urgency (10), and I contend that zombies in WWZ are an example of such iconic symbols. With their ever increasing emphasis on human consumption, the decimation of cities, governments, and humans as well, zombie films, particularly WWZ in this case, use zombies as a symbol that relates the dramatic urgency Nixon deems so necessary for confrontation with very real slow violence. This eco critical allegory is one reason why the slow and shambling zombie has fallen out of favor in many zombie films around the cultural moment of 9/11. Although by restoring the status quo, WWZ may be one of the least effective zombie films to accomplish this allegory to date. According to Slavoj Žižek, “the unattained archetype of a long series…is still George A. Romero’s Night of the Living Dead, where the ‘undead’ are not portrayed as embodiments of pure evil, of a simple drive to cure or revenge, but as sufferers, pursuing their victims with an awkward persistence, coloured by a kind of infinite sadness (“The Real and its Vicissitudes” 22-23).
The movements of Romero’s ghouls appear tedious and pained; imbued with the weight of life (or undeath, as the case may be). They seem to manifest as restless spectres of the Vietnam War; their faces empty, shell shocked, and their bodies in various states of ruin. They function as reminders of the past that refuse to be put to rest, but nevertheless, they lack the urgency and representational impact of fast zombies—particularly the frenzied zombies of *WWZ*—in a context of terror in a media saturated, contagion and biological warfare wary, environmentally volatile and terrorism fear mongering society. *WWZ*’s zombies do not move awkwardly; they do not suffer but inflict suffering although they are still not evil in the strictest sense. They are ferocious rather than sad and contemplative; indeed, they foreclose the possibility of reflection and pathos in the viewers. The sudden, unexpected zombie attacks dramatize concerns that humans will never be prepared for the next inevitable siege; inevitable because in zombie films the dead always return. In *Cryptomimesis*, Jodey Castricano recalls Slavoj Žižek’s remark that the dead return as “‘collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt’” in order to think through revenance and how the dead might go about “recover[ing] a debt” (“The First Partition” 9). The return of the dead and the payment they exact can be understood in part as an aggressive potential reckoning on behalf of the planet that seeks to eradicate the threat of the human animal to Earth; in effect, we are paying in part for our abuse of the planet we inhabit. The uncanny warp-speed of *WWZ*’s zombies is even more pronounced than it is in its living counterparts (the infected of *28 Days Later* (2002)) or even its undead ones (*Dawn of the Dead* (2004)), creating a hyperbolized state of threat and emergency in the world of the film that is perhaps a more salient warning about negative human ecological impact on the planet.
Nixon claims significantly that “digitally speeded up time” and “foreshortened narrative” constitutes a “cultural milieu” in which slow violence becomes invisible; the remedy for this entails, in part, “re-defining speed: we see such efforts in talk of accelerated species loss, rapid climate change, and in attempts to recast ‘glacial’—once a dead metaphor for ‘slow’—as a rousing, iconic image of un-acceptably fast loss” (“Introduction” 13). What is seen in WWZ is a depiction of the increasingly visible “fast loss” of non-human animal and human animal life, which is in turn both congruous with the speeding images at the outset of the film, and highly affective. In one particularly striking meta-image that is culturally referential and grounded in reality, a ‘live’ news image shows a blurry image of one man attacking another beneath an overpass, representationally alluding to the incident in 2012 when Ronald Pappo’s face was mostly eaten by a naked man near a Miami overpass. The image suggests that amidst growing fears of virulence, zombies and cannibalistic behavior in particular are bearing down on humanity to inversely consume the most wanton consumer of the earth’s resources, and so there is an ecocritical reckoning to be had for the wanton consumption of the planet by humans. For instance, Sarah Juliet Lauro claims we can imagine this “eco-zombie” as a “gruesome reckoning”; characteristic of “a planet angered by humanity’s long-term damage” (“The Eco-Zombie” 55). Although Lauro speaks generally about the contemporary zombie figure, her ideas resonate in WWZ’s opening sequence, which I argue suggests a wary consciousness of the ways in which humans are destroying the

---

54 The attack on Pappo brought the word ‘zombie’ into the public vocabulary that in some way acknowledged a variation of the figure as real. Interestingly, the Pentagon has laid out a battle plan against zombies: “officials from U.S. Strategic Command used the specter of a planet-wide attack by the walking dead as a training template for how to plan for real-life, large-scale operations, emergencies and catastrophes” (Crawford); to avoid political fallout and to avoid alarming the public, the rationale for such preparation was to devise “a completely impossible scenario that could never be mistaken as a real plan” (Crawford). Nevertheless, the Pentagon added a caveat that the United States was not anticipating any zombie outbreak, thus drawing attention to the representational cultural currency the figure still has.
planet, both passively and actively. The obvious example is the shot of beached dolphins on the news. While there is no explanation available for the event—the rest of the caption reads, “researchers still don’t know what is causing dolphins to swim ashore”—the viewer is perhaps inclined to consider the ways in which human-made ecological disasters such as the death of oceans, oil spills, or things like terraforming in general, might have a negative impact on the natural environment and the non-human animals that live in it. The death of the dolphins seems to be of some concern to the researchers, and yet it is glossed over; one of a myriad of images lost in the competition for viewer attention. Nevertheless, the opening sequence contains a complex aesthetic space of visual images and auditory input that invite a consideration of how dangerous it is to endorse willful distraction and the anthropocentric seating of the human subject as outside of and above the natural world.55 While these concerns are quickly abandoned in favor of a man versus nature sub-narrative, their import—which I will explore in the next section—cannot be disavowed so easily.

**Ecological Abandonment, Human Exceptionalism**

When in the opening sequence the plight of dolphins on the news is supplemented by the caption “Man vs. Nature,” WWZ contradicts ethology in relation to non-human animals

---

55 Brooks’ novel also acknowledges the way that humans and their zombified counterparts threaten the natural world in a telling display of anthropocentrism that denies the suffering and sentience of other living beings. This opening scene recalls an interview towards the end of the novel *World War Z* with navy man Michael Choi, who joined the navy because of the love of the ocean and whales instilled in him by his father. Choi asserts that it is the whales and not the humans who ‘lost’ *World War Z*. He recalls the power, potential for destruction, but also the majesty and curiosity of the California grays, the humpbacks, blues, finbacks, and killer whales, but notes that as more humans took to the oceans to escape “Zeke” (zombies), the whales were all eaten (“Good-Byes” 28-29). Choi is explicit in his assurance that humans are to blame for the rapid deterioration of the earth and that they should be ashamed at their own zombie-like propensity to endlessly consume: as Choi disgustedly proclaims, the animals under siege from humans could be heard shrieking (28), and that “the next time someone tries to tell you about how the true losses of this war are ‘our innocence’ or ‘part of our humanity’... ‘Whatever, bro. Tell it to the whales’” (31). Choi voices the unimaginable here: the war and the narrative of the world is not about *us*. In the aftermath of the zombie war, the re-establishment of humans as the dominant life form has damming repercussions for non-human animals.
that highlights their intellectual and emotional complexity. It also undermines the concern for non-human animals that is stressed in the beginning of the sequence; rather than emphasize the importance of seeing humans as part of the planet that they impact, the caption Man [sic] “versus” Nature sets up these two categories as binary oppositions that are fundamentally opposed to one another. Further, it signals that this binary will persist through the remainder of the film’s opening and throughout the film in general in a way that highlights and complicates those culturally constructed binaries. The remainder of the opening sequence codes nature as something that must once again be conquered and subdued by mankind, and as such is diametrically opposed to the human subject—that is, the able bodied, Caucasian, heterosexual, rational subject of the Enlightenment.

The final frantic images in the opening sequence of WWZ warn that the true world war is one that engages humans against non-human animals, which are problematically essentialized and represented as biologically programmed killers; the images feature predators in the natural world from insects to killer whales that are defined in opposition to the human. There is a frenzy of the visible that characterizes nature as vicious and cruel; in the domain of predation and victimization, images of frenzied killing and eating ensue: wolves fight over a bloody carcass, bees swarm, vultures scavenge a decaying cadaver, ants swarm as one organism over the body of another insect, overwhelming it and sawing its limbs off piece by piece, a leopard attacks a gazelle, crocodiles churn the water as they make a kill, and a killer whale lunges onto a beach to ensnare a seal…the images blur and merge inside the letters of the film’s title, World War Z, implying that a similar cycle of frantic killing and eating lies at the heart of the film’s narrative and of nature itself. The spectre of

See, for instance, Steven Best, “Minding the Animals: Ethology and the Obsolescence of Left Humanism.”
‘the animal’ is one of reductive ferocity that has been used to repudiate nature; to understand it as antithetical to the clean and proper body and integral to suggesting its inferiority to ‘the human.’ In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida emphasizes that philosophers from Plato to Heidegger have judged the limit between man and animal as single and indivisible. On the other side of that limit is a homogenous set that one has the right to distinguish and mark as opposite, the Animal. This logic that ascribes common sense and philosophical sense and allows one to speak of the Animal as ‘general singular’ is one of the most symptomatic *asininities* of those who call themselves humans. (41)

The term ‘animal’ is a logocentric, sweeping generality that seeks to designate all beings that humans do not consider their equals as an undifferentiated mass. It is a word Wolfe dismisses as evidence of the “poverty of a humanism” that needs to ground itself in opposition to animals (*Animal Rites* xi). It has been a particularly useful rhetorical strategy that legitimates, guilt-free, the killing and exploitation of, as well as experimentation on, non-human animals for human benefit. For Derrida, referring to the animal in the singular as a reductive and cohesive singularity highlights the speciesism inherent in anthropocentrism: to do so confirms “not only the animality that [the human] is disavowing but his complicit, continued, and organized involvement in a veritable war of the species” (31), rather than an acknowledgement that the human is part of, not pinnacle of, a biological continuum. Increasingly, the left-humanist tradition has been criticized for being itself dogmatic in its deep-rooted presumptions of human essence and superiority, as well as tautological in its claims of human uniqueness. In the sequence of violence at the beginning of *WWZ*, the natural world is represented as wanton, irrational, and abject as opposed to the rational,
sanitized, and ordered human subject. As if to emphasize this representation, while stuck in traffic moments before the zombies attack in Philadelphia, Lane plays 20 questions with his family and the answer turns out to be an African cat. The invocation of the predatory animal foreshadows and contextualizes the behavior of the zombies to come, while also stressing the likeness between zombies and non-human animal predators: one zombie notably launches itself mouth first at the jugular of a victim. The spectacle of its human form mimicking the behavior of an African cat momentarily collapses the representational divide between ‘civilized’ human and ‘wild’ animal. This limited, violent ‘animalization’ is a common representation of the increasingly kinetic zombies since the turn of the millennium.\(^{57}\) Viewing this moment in light of the Ronald Pappo Miami cannibal incident that I mentioned, the film references the predatory nature of humans, non-human animals, and zombies. If this is the case, viewing survivors in the film as somehow outside of these predatory tendencies and separate from other species becomes a fraught endeavor. That said, the film has trouble reconciling its representation of nature and man [\textit{sic}] as opposing forces, and we see an instance of the film using a complex and evocative series of opening images where ideas are not easily deployed to predictable ends. One cannot help but see some parallels that appear to link insects, human animals, and the zombies together: the images of swarming ants and bees visually resemble the swarms of commuting humans, so that their appearance and modus operandi emphasize behavioral likeness rather than difference despite a presumed hierarchy based upon human exceptionalism.

\(^{57}\) See Chapters 4 and 5 for a discussion of the tendency of zombie films and film scholars to discuss the fast zombie as ‘animalized.’ In a scene that will be discussed shortly, the conflation of the African cat, the human, and the zombie that behaves like a large predator will be complicated by examining how a zombified African-American woman is coded as wilder and more savage than her zombified white, male counterpart towards the end of the film. Implicitly, the scene suggests the ways in which people of colour have historically been essentialized as bestial, licentious, and subhuman as compared to white people.
Overall, the ambivalence fades as \textit{WWZ} abandons the ecological concerns opened up in the beginning of the film, an opening that serves to contextualize what is stake. On the one hand, the opening sequence encourages the viewer to reflect on the ways in which their attention is redirected—in the Western world in particular but not exclusively—from important news in the media to the louder din of entertainment media, perhaps in an effort to make viewers pay attention to ecological and political concerns in their everyday lives. Ironically, insofar as the film also abandons concerns of ecological crisis to focus on Lane’s bid to save the world from zombies, the viewer is likewise distracted from such concerns by the entertainment value of the film. Within \textit{WWZ}, Lane’s journey ignores ecological and practical issues: he seems to effortlessly secure passage from city to city and country to country, and there is no concern about limited fuel for planes or the ever moving rescue warships—in fact, the film seems careful not to engage with the question of oil—neither is there a pressing concern to acquire food. This ease of mobility and access to food and resources is in direct opposition to most zombie films, in which dwindling food, medical supplies, and fuel are at the center of survival.\footnote{In \textit{Dead Set} (2008) it becomes clear that food and water are running out inside the secure walls of the \textit{Big Brother} house; at the end of \textit{Dawn of the Dead} (2004) the yacht on which the final survivors escape runs out of fuel; in \textit{Resident Evil: Extinction} (2007), the entire earth becomes a desert, its resources tapped, and the reference to Americans in the Nevada desert desperate for fuel directly recalls the politics of resource extraction in the Middle East. For the most part, extensive travel in these narratives is an impossibility. In fact, Lane’s hypermobility in \textit{WWZ} emphasizes his prominence as white saviour and full human; he is the only character able to move so effortlessly through so many spaces, as opposed to most other characters, who lack mobility and thus die or are at risk of death. For instance, Lane’s vessel-bound family have nowhere to go and if sent ashore will surely die, and Dr. Fassbahn’s first tentative steps in Korea result in accidental suicide when he slips and shoots himself in the head.} Thus, Lane’s ease of mobility further secures his place of privilege in the film. Overall, \textit{WWZ} includes this opening sequence to encourage the viewer to think through the representation of humans as opposed to non-human animals; to confront the limitations of an anthropocentric fantasy in the film of nature as a force to be bested, and
non-human animals as frightening in their violence and ferocity. The opening sequence of frenetic and ferocious insects and non-human animals seems to be intended to establish Lane as the eventual world savior and to ultimately and problematically reify the boundary between ‘rational humans’ and ‘aggressive non-human animals’, and serves as one example of this anthropocentric fantasy. On the whole, the film is concerned only with the perseverance of the human subject, which is ostensibly male, white, and American. Nevertheless, the privileging of a rigidly defined human actually brings the issue of othering those of other genders, ethnicities, and species into sharp focus, which in turn prompts the viewer to question Lane’s, and America’s, assumed exceptionalism both in the film and outside of it. As Braidotti argues in *The Posthuman*, when difference is used to justify inferiority, those condemned as racialized, sexualized, and naturalized others are understood as less than human (“Post-Humanism” 15). Included in these categories are women (sexualized), natives or perhaps ethnic minorities (racialized), and animals (naturalized), which reduces the number of those with the privilege of being called ‘human’ to a limited constituency. The patriarchy that is inscribed through species inequality is important: it sets the groundwork for establishing and justifying systemic and unequal power dynamics between humans and animals, men and women, and between white people and non-white people.59 WWZ positions ‘Mother’ nature—a feminine force—as the enemy to mankind [*sic*] as it trumpets both American and ‘human’ exceptionalism in the figure of Lane, the heroic United Nations Investigator turned family man turned Investigator once more.

---

59 In *The Dreaded Comparison* for instance, Marjorie Spiegel details the disturbing rhetoric that is used historically to abuse and exploit humans, particularly African Americans, based on their conflation with non-human animal subjects that are perceived to be lesser beings than humans for ethical and moral consideration.
Establishing “Mother Nature” early in the film as violent and bloody cannot help but invoke the division of Man and Nature in a way that discursively produces nature as feminine, and therefore antithetical and inferior to mankind [sic]. I keep referring to man and mankind because the film clearly establishes a patriarchal dichotomy between men as default humans, and nature, as evidenced earlier in the “Man versus Nature” caption I discussed.

Perhaps most telling about the film’s representation of man versus nature in this context is the monologue of 23 year old British virologist Dr. Fassbahn (Elyes Gabel) to Lane as they journey to South Korea: he asserts that “Mother Nature is a serial killer. No one’s better. More creative. Like all serial killers, she can’t help the urge to want to get caught. And what good are all those brilliant crimes if no one takes the credit? So she leaves crumbs…she’s a bitch.” Nature here is familiarly set up as a ruthless maternal force over which militaristic and scientific men must regain control and dominance; she is depicted selectively by the young scientist as pathological, deranged, and pre-meditative. Lauro articulates this dichotomy when she claims that in general, “one sees the American zombie come to stand with its Haitian mother—as a monstrous figure tied explicitly to the things of the earth—turn against its scientific father for his infractions against nature” (54). Here, she imagines the zombie as an unruly feminized force that is not in the grasp of man’s power, one that emphasizes his inability to control nature (62) although WWZ is an exception to the rule. 60 Lane discovers, based on a precedent that predators will avoid the flesh of terminal or

60 Interestingly, Richard Dyer writes that there is an overwhelming perception—rightly or wrongly—that serial killing occurs in countries perceived as white countries, and means white men killing white women. Moreover, he claims that serial killing elaborates on the idea that “white men are cold and unfeeling” since “in the hands of serial killers, [killing] is cerebral and clean, two of the master values of whiteness” (“Three Questions” 112). In this context, Fassbahn’s accusation against Mother Nature is ironic but also political: it conflates the paternal symbolic values of rationality, system, and order gone mad with the supposedly un-clean, improper body of the maternal symbolic to depict nature as a pan-ultimate enemy of man [sic]). Fassbahn’s claim distracts from the perception that serial killing is a white, male, and ‘human’ action.
diseased prey, that infecting himself with a curable but deadly disease makes him similarly invisible to the undead. Using this intelligence, a vaccine is created that renders humans invisible to the zombies long enough to mount counter attacks and destroy them despite the fact that such a ‘vaccine’ involves temporarily infecting the population with an alternative to the zombie virus.\footnote{The use of a vaccine in the film is a less cynical twist on the use of vaccines in Brook’s novel: while the film highlights man’s ingenuity, resilience, and ability to find a solution, the novel presents it as a deplorable example of capitalist manipulation at the outset of the zombie war: one businessman capitalizes on people’s fear by developing a fake zombie vaccination, Phalanx, reasoning that “a cure would make people buy it only if they thought they were infected. But a vaccine! That’s preventative! People will keep taking it as long as they’re afraid it’s out there!” (“Blame” 28-29). In effect, the film goes out of its way to project an ideal image of America, Lane, and the human that reinforces American exceptionalism.} Virulence in the film is thus represented in a way that defies its use in other zombie films: here it is not a death sentence, but the key to developing a solution. Mother Nature is defeated by scientists and doctors, as she has been at other points in human history with the development of vaccines for diseases such as Polio. Beneath the assurance that the United Nations, spearheaded by the efforts of one heroic American, have done the impossible and won the zombie war is the message that one of the 21st century’s greatest anxieties, that of falling victim to biological warfare or any number of contagious, mutating viruses, is unfounded; the authorities will find a way to inoculate the population. If Mother Nature has moved against humanity in the form of viral infection, her own weapon is used against her by science, medicine and reason—the failsafe of humanism—to make humans stronger. As such, the film manages to accomplish what the zombie narrative by its very nature resists: restoration, a return to the status quo, and the reification of the civilized human subject as the undisputed dominant life-form on the planet with nature firmly re-relegated to its place in the service of man; particularly those military men who are straight, white, and in the case of WWZ, American. As Jesse Benjamin observes of the film, “this analytic allows for a bizarre anti-environmentalism to cohabitate with the neo-conservative, macho...
geopolitics of the global narrative” (“Zombie Hasbara”), except that in the context of anthropocentrism and the figure of the human established in the film, it is neither surprising nor bizarre that WWZ raises environmental concerns—couched in the figure of Mother Nature, a powerful and feminine force that is un-fazed and unsubdued by the ostensibly male human subject—and then calls into question the exceptionalism of the human only to more fully reinscribe it. To do otherwise would be to undermine the human figure it establishes through Lane and his heroism, as well as the suggestion that human—or American—intervention is needed and even able to re-tame nature. Thus, as the film comes to a close, the evocative opening sequence and its implicit concerns are never returned to.

During a parallel triumphant montage end-sequence featuring images of people across the globe pushing the zombies back and burning them, Lane’s voiceover suggests that in the aftermath of the War, humans finally are listening and responding to calls for help over the radio waves and fighting together for a common goal. As such, the film closes with a vehement disavowal of the more cynical interpretation of humanity at the outset in that it insists that humans are not in fact violent predators—or akin to any non-human animals—that are subject to Mother Nature. They are neither selfishly preoccupied with entertainment nor oblivious to the plight of others, and by implication of human success in this last sequence, there is always a way to re-establish security and plenitude of food, shelter, and other necessities, although on the state of the world and its resources Lane remains silent.

Although the scene seems to be a simple disavowal and dismissal of the concerns raised at the outset of the film, it reveals an important critical capacity: by opening with a saturation of images that highlight ecological destruction, the din of media voices, the problematic representation of non-human animals as violent, and so on; the film seems to recognize that
such matters are important and that they cannot be avoided. After the entirety of the film makes room for a reflective and critical capacity to recognize that the human figure and anthropocentrism are privileged at the expense of women, ethnic others, non-human animals, and the ecology; after it enables a number of contradictory ideas about the ecology, the zombie, and the human, it tries and fails to contain and contradict this counter-narrative to human exceptionalism. The evidence of the humanist, anthropocentric ideology failing even as it tries to assert itself in WWZ can be found in what is not articulated in the final scene: as outwardly hopeful as this ending seems, its insistence on neat closure is pre-mature, if not slightly shrill. Unaddressed is the fact that at the close of the film no real cure has been found; the vaccine itself is derived from deadly pathogens—a solution that seems short-sighted and risky if said vaccine puts those it immunizes at risk for incurable, deadly diseases—and the etiology of the virus remains a mystery. The conclusion I draw from this observation is that zombification in the world of WWZ will inevitably continue to happen, and so in its insistence in providing catharsis and comfort to the viewer, WWZ offers hedges against the night that merely deflect—not prevent—the troubling promise of a recurring threat in the form of the living dead. As such, and by their very “nature”, they will return to threaten the integrity of the human subject again and again. Even as the literal events in the film seek to validate American exceptionalism and the triumph of the human, its aestheticizing of this idea allows for myriad readings and interpretations. Not the least of these is a revelation of how constructing Lane as human reveals the film’s anthropocentric ideological biases.
The View from America: Reifying the Human Subject in WWZ

WWZ differs greatly from the original novel in that Brook’s narrative is comprised of an oral history of the zombie war; a series of chronologically ordered personal anecdotes and interviews from numerous countries and with people from diverse backgrounds that weaves its way from the Great Panic of infection through to the aftermath of the war. This diverse and multifaceted approach of storytelling is revealed to be a dismissed portion of the United Nations Postwar Commission Report, deemed by the chairperson as being “too intimate,” based on “too many opinions” and “too many feelings.” This emotional aspect of the war is seen as the “human factor” that would cloud the objective facts, figures, and objective “cold, hard data” desired by the committee (Brooks “Introduction” 2). In Forster’s WWZ, the “human” factor comes from the limited and totalizing narrative of Gerry Lane, which glorifies American exceptionalism despite the film’s insistence on a supposed unifying, global approach to the zombie pandemic as spearheaded by the United Nations. It also reinforces the dominant narrative of what it means to be fully human, an assertion that is fraught and suspect in and of itself. Michel Foucault asserts that despite the willingness to accept the word human as a constant given, “‘man is an invention of recent date’” (qtd. in Wolfe, “Introduction: What is Posthumanism?” xi). Despite the tendency to accept the term as a given, many scholars point out its frailty: as Steven Best notes, “since the first cosmologies, ancient Greek philosophy, Christian theology, and modern science to Marxist humanism and naturalism, Western culture has struggled, and failed, to attain an adequate explanation of the human species”; it is only since Darwin’s theory of evolution in 1859 that

---

62 Interestingly, according to feminist theorists such as Carol Adams, emotions are traditionally understood as a feminine investment, “invalid sources of knowledge” that are located on the undesirable side of the patriarchal mind/body split (201). As untrustworthy sources of knowledge, these personal anecdotes that are rejected in the film WWZ are implied to be feminine and thus irrelevant.
humans have begun to have any understanding of their origins and natures. As a predominant Western-European philosophy, humanism emphasizes the autonomy, intelligence, values, and overall exceptionalism of humans. With a 500 year trajectory from renaissance humanism to liberal humanism, it appeals positively to a core or central humanity; an essence that legitimizes the label ‘human.’ For some, the “universal essence” of the human is its status as a rational animal, which places it at the epicenter of creation. That is, the ability to speak and communicate is a marker of superior intelligence and thus underscores human uniqueness and singularity. Continuing the focus on intelligence, left-humanist thought later valorized European Enlightenment values of autonomy, empiricism, learning, critical thinking, and secularism or agnosticism, in addition to the social, intellectual and technological benefits that resulted from scientific progress (Best). From this description of essence comes the problematic belief that the human is a category which is always already superior to all other life forms by virtue of cognitive ability; that despite a complex biological and cultural evolution, the markers of humanity are predetermined, ever unchanging, and thus ahistorical, apolitical, and outside social relations. The construction and maintenance of conceptions of what it means to be human are fixed, essentialist, and self-serving. As Foucault observes,

it is a fact that, at least since the seventeenth century, what is called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science, or politics. Humanism serves to color and to justify the

---

63 See Best.
65 See Best; also see Badmington, “Introduction: Approaching Posthumanism.”
conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse. (qtd. in Wolfe, “Introduction: What is Posthumanism?”xiv)

The human is a comfortingly and deceptively stable and impenetrable category; one that consistently strives to maintain what Graham refers to as “ontological hygiene” (60) not to be contaminated by the ‘natural’ world. Best argues that “human identity in Western culture has been formed through the potent combination of agricultural domestication of animals and plants, Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism, Greco-Roman rationalism, medieval theology, Renaissance humanism, and modern mechanistic science.” From the Judeo-Christian belief in man’s God-given right to use the earth and non-human animals as a means to human ends, to Philosophy’s mind/body split and the Cartesian belief that non-human animals are mechanistic and devoid of both emotions and the ability to feel pain, human civilization has staked its claim by asserting its dominance over and exploitation of all other life forms and the natural world. Finding its seat of power and privilege in culture rather than nature, the humanist legacy has been established at the expense of the non-human animals it defines in opposition to itself; this includes all those considered less than human. In WWZ, the category of human is narrowed even further when Lane is represented as a ‘whole’ human, whatever that might mean, and in part because he is not just white and male, but American.

Lane is established as the epitome of the human subject in the film against which all others fall short. Casting Pitt forecloses the viewer’s suspension of disbelief on the one hand—Lane hardly seems like an everyman—and on the other, prepares the viewer for a familiar trope of heroism and masculine bravado. Caucasian, blue-eyed, blond-haired, handsome and able-bodied, he embodies the ideal of the fully defined human: “‘the Cartesian subject of the cogito, the Kantian ‘community of reasonable beings’, or, in more sociological
terms, the subject as citizen, rights-holder, property-holder, and so on’” (“Introduction” Wolfe qtd. in Braidotti 1). The pinnacle of American domestic masculinity, Lane is a family man who loves his children; who in fact has voluntarily left his career as a United Nations Investigator to diligently make pancakes every morning for them. Nevertheless, his extensive military experience as a UN observer marks him as an ideal, informed American hero and defender of human rights: Lane was on the ground during the Liberian Civil War, in Sri Lanka in 2007 where war crimes, child soldier recruitment, abductions and other human rights violations took place, and he investigated Chechen war crimes. Ever the caring husband and father, the only reason Lane agrees to help the United Nations find a cure for the zombie pandemic is to keep his family safe aboard the U.S.S. Argus. Lane’s journey to save the world is the master narrative of the film, but it hinges on the hope that Lane will eventually reunite with his unscathed heteronormative family, thus reinforcing the galvanizing power of the nuclear family as a motivator for his survival and the glue that holds humanity together. Unlike the majority of survivors in other zombie films, Lane neither has to watch a loved one die, nor kill them himself because they are infected. Ultimately, none of those characters considered important—the apex white family and their ‘adopted’ son in particular—are in real danger, although there are moments when it seems Lane’s family will be forced off the U.S.S. Argus. The viewer is, however, afforded an empathetic moment with the only zombie in the film that is somewhat “humanized”: a white, male, former World Health Organization scientist that Lane must face off with in order to discover if infecting himself with a deadly disease will actually work as camouflage. Unlike the other zombies, this one is slow, appraising, alone, and rather like the somehow sad zombies of Romero’s Night of the Living Dead. The zombie wears a wedding ring on its left hand—as
Lane does himself—and subtly prompts the viewer to contemplate the person this man might have once been although his personhood and loss is clearly linked to his worth as an intelligent married man who may or may not have children. By distinction, the one female zombie in Cardiff’s lab for the World Health Organization that is briefly focused on is an African-American scientist; unlike the Caucasian male zombie, she bares her teeth and is pure menace. According to Jayna Brown, “racist scientific ‘fact’ from early natural sciences, political and philosophical tracts have rendered the black female body as fecund, promiscuous, and bestial” (125), so that representations such as these re-inscribe the racialized female body as more closely related to biological function, aggressive animality, and a supposedly vicious Mother Nature. Juxtaposing these two singular zombies underscores WWZ’s underlying racial and gendered hierarchy: even here, the white, male, married zombie is represented as somehow less violent and threatening than the female, African-American zombie. In Max Brook’s novel, the virus is first coined “‘African Rabies,’” which according to Aalya Ahmad “is a clear reference to the racism-tinged panics that accompanied the growing awareness of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and the ongoing racism fuelled indifference towards the scourge in Africa” (“Gray is the New Black” 135). It becomes clearer as the film progresses that it deploys an unmistakable racial and national hierarchy with Lane at the pinnacle.

In WWZ, racial minorities have significantly less agency, competency, and means for mobility compared to the American hero embodied by Pitt’s Gerry Lane. Early in the chaos of the zombie assault, Lane and his family take refuge in the apartment of a Newark, New Jersey Latino family. Representing a demographic of foreign immigrants in the United States, this gracious but non-English speaking family is doomed to die because they refuse to
leave with Lane and his family. Moreover, the framing of the scene suggests that due to class stratification, a language barrier, and lack of resources for upward mobility, the family is prevented from leaving. For instance, the framing of the Latino family’s cramped apartment indicates their limited means. Each shot draws attention to the clutter of objects in the background and to the limited space of the environment: a shot from the kitchen reveals a tattered brown couch that demarcates a living area in the same room, while next to it rests an ironing board and clothes. An establishing shot of the kitchen from the living space shows a rack of clothes blocking the refrigerator, which demonstrates that there is inadequate space for living and storage for the small family. Presumably, they are unable to afford a better home. In fact, nothing in the apartment appears to be new: a later shot of their young son Tomas’ (Fabrizio Zacharee Guido) bedroom reveals a tiny space that fits almost entirely in the camera frame and in which old blankets serve as curtains and the bed consists of a small mattress and mismatched bed sheets. Notably, there are no toys in the room or posters on the wall, suggesting that the family is unable to provide these luxuries for their son. In addition, the apartment is contextualized by an establishing shot of the corridor in which it is located, which is illuminated by ominous red light in the wake of a power outage, and which is featureless but for its oppressive brick walls. Clearly, it is a less than ideal space for habitation, and it stands in sharp contrast to the establishing shots of Lane’s family home early in the film, which demonstrates his family’s privileged socioeconomic standing. The Lane household is a fashionable two-story home in suburbia, shot in early morning sunshine and offered privacy from neighboring homes via large, brilliantly green trees on both sides. An interior wide-angle shot of Lane’s kitchen reveals a brightly lit room with wooden shutters, a stainless steel stove, dishwasher and other appliances, marble-counter tops, and
decorative plants. A reverse shot in the scene reveals that the Lane kitchen is perhaps as large as the entire apartment of the Latino family who offers the Lanes shelter. The social stratification of the two families also becomes clear in that although they both occupy the same space in Tomas’ apartment, his family and Lane’s family initially appear in separate shots from one another in a way that highlights the invisible but perceptible gap between them. In one of the most pivotal of these shots, Lane scans the radio for news updates in the foreground with his family in the background before the shot cuts to the perplexed faces of Tomas’ parents as his mother asks in Spanish what is being said. The moment reveals a disconnect between Lane’s family and Tomas’ family in that Tomas’ parents neither speak nor understand English, and are thus always already disadvantaged in that they miss pivotal and necessary information unless it is translated for them. Tomas, however, does speak English fluently, and because he can speak English he manages to assimilate seamlessly into Lane’s family unit; he is unofficially adopted once he decides to follow them rather than stay in the apartment with his parents. The subtext dictates that those considered others must assimilate or perish; Steven Pokornowski suggests that cultural texts demand either assimilation or annihilation, and that identity is policed by Western, white male ideology (“Insecure Lives” 218). In this case, said ideology is represented by Lane, who alone has the ability to save Tomas by giving him a new identity. In fact, when Lane discovers that Tomas comforted his youngest daughter, who was scared and crying, he says, “thanks, Tommy.” As such, Lane anglicizes Tomas’ name and in so doing, acknowledges that the boy can and is being assimilated and accepted into the Lanes inner family circle. This moment is significant in that is immediately precedes the scene in which Lane offers Tomas’ parents a chance to come with the Lanes, suggesting that perhaps Tomas’ potential for assimilation and change
convinces Lane that the family can be saved. As Robin Wood points out, “otherness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with (as Barthes suggests in *Mythologies*) in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself” (“The American Nightmare” 66). In an attempt to convince Tomas’ parents to leave, Lane tells them that he “used to work in dangerous places. People who moved survived. Those who didn’t….um, movimiento es vida”: movement is life. Subject to a sort of Social Darwinism, Tomas’s family is unable to cleave to the expectations of a predominantly white, English speaking society and are immobilized by it, thus they do not survive.

Bolstering the privilege of Western male whiteness is the juxtaposition of Lane with his United Nations boss, Umutoni. Despite having the resources and authority to track Lane, extract him and his family by helicopter from New Jersey, and send him with military backup around the globe, Umutoni bows to Lane’s superior skills, serving mainly as an occasional *deus ex machina* so that Lane can carry out his mission and be retrieved. As Benjamin notes, Lane’s “presumptively African boss at the UN is competent, but unable to do more than recognize and deploy Gerry’s greater intelligence and skills” (“Zombie Hasbara”). When Lane is mistaken for dead later in the film, Umutoni is helpless to keep his family safely onboard the U.S.S. Argus. The Caucasian Naval Commander has them immediately sent ashore, since only essential personnel are allowed to remain onboard. Notably, the familiar trope of saving women and children does not apply here; while Lane’s family has importance in a racial axiology, females and children are, next to a ship full of military trained men, deemed dangerous and expendable. In fact, Lane’s wife Karin (Mireille Enos) is depicted as
a stereotypically emotional woman: she calls Lane just to hear his voice, not once but twice in a row, and the subsequent ringing draws the undead to him and his entourage as they try to re-fuel their escape plane. Her need to know her husband is safe is coded as an annoying interjection into the important and busy lives of men endeavoring to save the world, and she is thus responsible for the death of good men like Captain Speke—also American and white—who sacrifices himself so Lane can escape. Even in terms of procreation, females have no value in WWZ except to be protected by men or serve as motivation for their actions.66 Without a connection to her husband, Karin lacks the ability to migrate to safer places of her own volition; she and her children require and rely upon the guidance, resources, and protection made possible for Lane alone.

In keeping with the film’s inherent hierarchy, Dr. Fassbahn is presumably of South Asian descent. Played by Elyes Gabel, who has performed a number of South Asian/Indian roles, Fassbahn stands for any number of visible minorities and is considered in the film to be the last best hope for the world; his training might help the United Nations discover the etiology and cure for the virus. Despite his supposed importance—he is ‘essential’ because as he puts it, “the hard part”, seeing Mother Nature’s “crumbs for the clues they are,” requires a decade of devoted study—he is taken into the South Korean hot-zone with Lane and immediately panics and shoots himself in the head despite being coached on how to handle the situation. He is young, handsome in a soft, intellectual way, and as a lesser racialized body next to the white, American, military men, Fassbahn’s death is negligible. Commenting on the young doctor’s lack of military, ‘manly’ experience, Jesse Benjamin reads this

66 Incidentally, post-apocalypse in Brook’s novel the women of Russia are defined only in terms of the usefulness of their wombs: Maria Zhuganova is pregnant with her eighth child in the novel without knowing the fathers or her children. Russia post-war is using the uterus as its “greatest weapon” (“Good-Byes” 5).
moment as “potentially useful intelligence wasted on a lesser person, to be sure, who lacked the hetero-manly fortitude to face down the threat, thus confirming his lesser racial status, almost straight out of 19th century colonial tropes of the lesser manhood of colonized men” (“Zombie Hasbara”). Further, WWZ patronizingly asserts that by virtue of these masculine qualities, Lane is clever enough to discover, untrained, what experts could not. This principle goes for the trio of still living World Health Organization scientists in Cardiff, Wales, as well, who work with deadly diseases and yet cannot deduce on their own the solution that Lane proposes within hours, and while suffering from a substantial wound. While the ethnic minority characters in the film are always at risk, as the central patriarchal human figure, Lane remains in an unspoken magic circle of safety: as a case in point, he gets infected blood in his mouth early in the film and for perhaps the first time in zombie film mythology and in the rest of WWZ itself, this does not result in either sickness or zombification.

Confirming an America-centric narrative, the majority of the locales in this film about a globalized zombie pandemic are nonetheless set in the United States: Philadelphia, New York, and New Jersey are featured prominently. During the first on-screen attack in Philadelphia, in which an explosion can be seen beyond the impenetrable traffic-jam and high rises, the spectre of the World Trade Center and 9/11 looms, letting the viewer know whose terror and loss is privileged. South Korea is one of the few foreign settings of the film, but it is barely glimpsed outside of the darkness and the rain. There, the viewer meets only an all-white, all-male military unit from the United States and not a single surviving Korean; the rhetoric of American military intervention as a guiding force in other countries is

67 The flashback in this scene to the infected being brought in show an Asian doctor, but the present-time scene features white military personnel.
legitimized here, perhaps explaining the displacement and invisibility of Koreans in their own country. When Lane reaches Israel and is escorted by a female Israeli soldier named Segen (Daniella Kertesz), the role of the foreign other is made clear yet again: despite her military training and obvious skill in defensive and offensive fighting, she is eventually saved by Lane: once her hand is bitten, he instinctually cuts it off and prevents the infection from spreading. In “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe discusses such acts of severing in the context of technologies of destruction and massacres in particular. He argues that after massacres, the bodies left behind quickly become skeletons whose “morphology henceforth inscribes them in the register of undifferentiated generality: simple relics of an unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities” that nevertheless maintain a stubborn “will to mean, to signify something” (172). While there is a tension between meaning and meaninglessness in the case of skeletal remains, the same is not true in the case of the severing of a limb. Although Mbembe points out that the severing of a limb replaces death as an immediate result, its meaning is clear and enduring:

the traces of this demiurgic surgery persist for a long time, in the form of human shapes that are alive, to be sure, but whose bodily integrity has been replaced by pieces, fragments, folds, even immense wounds that are difficult to close. Their function is to keep before the eyes of the victim—and of the people around him or her—the morbid spectacle of severing. (172)

The severing of a limb, then, has the effect of constantly reminding the victim that they are visibly incomplete, damaged, and wounded. In WWZ, I read the severing of Segen’s hand in such a framework: insofar as she represents Israel, the only nation that is winning the zombie war, Segen and her country are symbolically dis-abled and thus coded as lesser humans.
compared to the able bodied Lane (and by extension, America). As aforementioned, although Lane ingests zombie blood and does not turn earlier in the film, he fully anticipates that his Israeli companion, perhaps lacking his divinely-granted human subjectivity, will not be so lucky. The severing of her limb conveys several other things at once: one, that Lane remains the undisputed hero of the film; and two, Segen can be understood—despite her military training and shaved head that may be coded as masculine, as well as the fact that she is not framed as a romantic lead—as a female to be saved in accordance with other females like Lane’s wife and children.

**In Defense of Security, Militarism, and Totalitarianism: The “Salvation Gates” of Jerusalem**

The most problematic politically invested scene in *WWZ* is Lane’s visit to the newly fortified city of Jerusalem. Having anticipated the zombie war, Israel is the only safe haven in the world until Nova Scotia, Canada, is discovered to be safe at the end of the film. While overtly suggesting that grievances that have existed for centuries are put aside in the face of a threat against all humans, the scene privileges a Zionist and segregationist agenda that justifies the widely condemned Apartheid Wall that actually does exist in Israel. Moreover, it uses zombified Palestinians—which are understood as insects and thus sub-human life—to further said agenda by invoking speciesism. Compared to the dark, amorphous and ominous landscape of South Korea, Jerusalem radiates safety and warmth: shot against the haze of rising heat in bright sunshine and heavily monitored by Israel’s military both in the air and on the ground, the city offers order and a fantasy of multiculturalism and inclusiveness that brazenly rewrites and effaces the tumultuous historical relationship between Palestinians and Jews while aggrandizing Israeli militarization. The vision of inclusiveness in the scene is
difficult to believe, given Israel’s rigid stance on Palestine: Anne Gwynne calls the wall “a monstrous creation born out the Zionist greed for Palestinian land combined with a collective delusional paranoia that an unarmed people is going to “’drive [them] into the sea’” (“Anger and Tears”). Like Rebecca Kook, she also notes the “‘Jewish only’” roads, the illegal colonies that are built on stolen Palestinian land, and the Jewish colonists that shot at the original owners if they re-entered their own fields (“Anger and Tears”). When told that Israel is winning the war because they built a wall around Jerusalem, Lane himself depoliticizes this history in his easy and non-contextual dismissal: “People have been building walls there for millennia.” Jurgen Warmbrun (Ludi Boeken) tells Lane that every person they save is a zombie they do not have to fight, implicitly including the Palestinians as equals to Jews, and draws Lane’s attention to what he calls the “salvation gates” of Jerusalem, where the military run checkpoints that allow secular and Hassidic Jews as well as Palestinians into the Holy City. This ecumenical premise is a blatant reimagining of their real life antecedents that effaces the complexity and violence of affairs in the real occupied territories, but in the context of American exceptionalism this should not be surprising. Lane and Warmbrun can be said to stand in for the authorities of the United States and Israel respectively, and as an ally of Israel, the United States has a vested interest in being uncritical of its abuses against Palestine. In his introduction to the book American Exceptionalism and Human Rights, Michael Ignatieff notes that a feature of American Exceptionalism is double standards. That is, “the US judges itself and its friends by different criteria than its enemies…[it] condemns abuses by hostile regimes like Iran and North Korea but excuses abuses by allies such as Israel” (7). In this context, the pro-Zionist undercurrent of the scene is understandable but problematic.
Given that Israel operates on the assumption that the Zionist narrative of history and identity give the Jews divine right to the land, the invocation of the phrase ‘salvation gates’ has ominous undertones in a country plagued by religious segregation. Indeed, an establishing shot of the city features a fluttering Israeli flag, itself a symbol of Zionism that undermines the supposed acceptance of Palestinians in the scene.\(^{68}\) As such, Israel’s Messianic claims of salvation are suspect, as is its military rule. Pokomowski points out that the “marriage of medical science and military defense acts as a microcosm where the biological insecurity of a zombie pandemic is sublimated to a military response” (224), and as Virilio suggests, the visual domain is concerned with the increasing militarization of everyday life (“Aesthetics, Vision and Speed” 2). While sweeping shots of helicopters patrolling Jerusalem give the impression of order and safety, they reinforce the devastating colonial occupation of Palestine. These shots invoke real-life conflict zones in the region, which Mbembe describes thusly: “everywhere, the symbolics of the top (who is on top) is reiterated. Occupation of the skies therefore acquires a critical importance, since most of the policing is done from the air” (167). In this context, it is plausible to read the hordes of undead at the gates as the Palestinian other given that most of the people turned would be those already kept outside Jerusalem, especially since Mbembe notes that “sovereignty meant occupation, and occupation meant relegating the colonized into a third zone between subjection and objecthood” (164). In this scene, the representation of zombies—and by extension, Palestinians—as an undifferentiated insectile swarm organism that devours everything in its path, problematizes the likeness between insects and humans in that the

\(^{68}\) According to the Jewish Visual Library, the Israeli flag is a “symbol of the Zionist movement”; the star of David is featured at the center and the blue stripes are inspired by a prayer shawl. See Alec Mishory, “Israel National Symbols: The Israeli Flag”. n.p. It is religiously an exclusionary symbol of nationalism.
sheer number of zombies serves to animalize them further; there is far less recognition of the creatures as mirrors of the human and thus they become an effectively reified black and white other to humans. Specifically, the zombies/Palestinians are coded as insectile, parasitic, and loathsome, particularly since the way they relentlessly scramble over one another, forming an undead pyramid that allows them to traverse the wall and eat or infect those on the inside, recalls earlier images in the film’s opening sequence in which insects like ants swarm over an unfortunate victim, eating and dismembering it alive. Disturbingly then, this scene uses the rhetoric of speciesism to symbolically dehumanize the zombies/Palestinians by representing them as insects. In addition, by embodying a contradictory, irreconcilable state of life and death, subject and object, the zombies here are a suitable model for the colonized subject; it reminds the viewer that representation, particularly when it serves to equate the natural world and/or non-human life as inferior, can and is used politically to suggest some lives are worth less than others. The ‘living dead’ for America, then, discursively produce the human as predominantly Western, white, and ‘right’ in the film, an assumption that is by turns sexist, speciesist, racist, and politically charged. Given their representation as a material threat to the living to be killed and disposed of, the walking dead are the epitome of bodies for disposal; to be called one is to have one’s agency, life, and importance removed.

As part of its segregationist agenda, the city’s success is modeled on aggressive militarization and the building of the Apartheid Wall; in the face of the zombie invasion, these measures are justified. More, they are the result of a hard-learned lesson of self-protection for Jews. Warmbrun relates to Lane what Benjamin calls a “revisionist Zionist history” that purports the “classic, and academically disproven myth that Israel was always
on the defense in its wars, and also the conflation of Palestinians and Arabs with Nazis, as ever-present existential threats to peace-loving Jews” (“Zombie Hasbara”). Warmbrun contextualizes the wall as an exercise in necessary preparedness and defense since history has proven time and again that “people don’t believe something can happen until it already has.” As evidence of this, Warmbrun tells Lane that in the 1930s Jews did not believe that they could be sent to concentration camps, that in 1972 they refused to fathom that they would be massacred in the Olympics, and finally, a month before October 1973 they saw Arab troop movements and agreed they did not pose a threat, until a month later the Arab attack almost drove the Jews into the sea.69 Neither Lane nor Warmbrun provide a more complex or nuanced context of events than this, but Warmbrun’s point is that separatism and border policing in the form of a city-wide wall has ensured the safety of the Jewish state. This message is further reinforced when ironically, it is the sound of singing Jews and Arabs—the result of inclusivity that has taken centuries to manifest—that encourages the zombies to amass in a frenzy and make their way over the fortified wall: “[i]t is Israel’s supposed humanism, and multicultural inclusiveness, which in the end weakens the fragile post-apocalyptic state and allows the zombie to overrun everything” (Benjamin). While I agree with Benjamin, I read this moment as a cynical assertion: multicultural inclusiveness in Israel leads to its destruction, implying that had it not admitted Palestinians, the song that drew the zombies would not be sung and the city would be safe. In that case, the notion that segregation and the policing of boundaries will ensure the survival of Israel is reinforced. As noted by Rebecca Kook, the Palestinians are historically excluded from Israel based on their ethnicity (Arab), which is denied to them as well as any possibility to assimilate (“National

69 In 1972, the Israeli Olympic team was massacred during the games in Munich by a Palestinian group.
Identity” 58). As such, they are indefinitely othered like the zombies themselves and the overall message of the film is one of heightened security measures and the merits of totalitarianism, or at the very least, isolation.

In both the film and novel version of *World War Z*, despite the rhetoric of America as heroic and the dream of humanity living and working together towards a common goal, totalitarian regimes are the ones that largely survive. For instance, a former CIA agent tells Lane in the film that The North Koreans survive because within 24 hours, they perform the greatest feat of social engineering by pulling the teeth of all 23 million people. In the novel, as Margo Collins and Elson Bond point out, nations that lack strong borders and military preparedness, such as Japan and Iceland, ultimately fail while those with strong boundaries like Cuba survive” (191). In the novel then, in a post 9/11 context, the moral seems to be the erection and militarized protection of borders in order to keep the zombies, or illegal immigrants, out of America. In order to maintain America as a democratic model and heroic guiding force for the world, the film closes with Lane successfully reuniting with his family and deferring the zombie threat. This predominantly positive representation of America is noted by Collins and Bond, who claim that in the novel, “Brook’s accounting acknowledges distinctive American virtues and praises a reborn country whose leadership changed the war from a defensive series of rearguard actions to a united global offensive” (189). The novel in particular highlights the intention of the United States, as with the “War on Terror,” to address the threat by marching forward every day until every trace of the enemy was “sponged, and purged, and if need be, blasted from the surface of the Earth”

---

70 John Stratton echoes this point when he outlines the similarities between zombies and displaced, non-white peoples as threats to the borders of a state. See “Zombie Trouble: Zombie Texts, Bare Life and Displaced People,” 277.
(WWZ “Around the World, And Above” 186); the President is described in a heated international conference as being “calm” and “firm” in a way no “world leader has since been able to duplicate” (189). Under the diligent watch of America in both the film and novel, we are to be re-assured that ‘humanity’ will prevail, but perhaps this is a nightmare vision more disturbing than the prospect that the zombies might win. Writing on the novel, Collins and Bond read WWZ as a challenge—posed and then met—to become more fully “human”, which they define as more reflective, co-operative, and self-reliant (188). Citing shared housing, organized armed patrols “against looting and zombie infiltration” (189), and “human ingenuity and resiliency” (188) as evidence of the attainment of ‘full human being,’ they sidestep what they call “greed and cowardice” that aids the plague’s spread” (188) but which is actually an indicator that the survival of the human may be lamentable. In the film, for instance, a former CIA agent is detained for selling guns to North Korea simply for personal gain, and there is mention by Warmbrun—drawn from the novel—that the plague may have started with organ harvesting in Germany. As if to contradict the depiction of America as a heroic nation, Lane is betrayed by his country and the UN when the family he is promised will be safe if he resumes active duty is evicted from the U.S.S. Argus beneath the establishing shot of a briskly fluttering United States flag. In the film in particular, order

71 Notably, before the Cold War ended, the United States provided training and weapons to the enemies of the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, many of whom later became enemies of America. See Derrida, “Autoimmunity” 116. This moment is a reminder of America’s complicity in international conflicts.

72 Aalya Ahmad calls this the “cannibalistic predations of the rich on the bodies of the poor” (135). The film does not elaborate, but readers of Brooks’ novel will know that the majority of these transplants come from China and Brazil and are exported to first world clients despite the implications that they are harvested from still living students, political prisoners, and so on.

73 The film lacks the geopolitical scale and implications of the novel, which highlights an excess of human depravity: in Cuba there are stories of lowering “troublemakers” in to zombie pits headfirst (“Around the World, and Above” 103), while Andre Renard remembers that a hospital once used to house mental patients who were left to starve during World War II was used in the zombie war first as an infirmary for the bitten, and eventually as a vault where the infected, living, dead, and who knows who else” were thrown (“Total War” 106). Humans in the novel use the Redeker Plan, “a ruthless blueprint for the survival of an apartheid regime” adopted by many nations (Ahmad 140), as well as a calculated logic that “relies on the sacrifice of large
is restored and full human being is represented as being ostensibly American, white, male, and militarized.

In the final moments of the film, after Lane is reunited with his waiting, unscathed family, his monologue is telling. Lane’s soothing voice is heard over radio broadcasts of people seeking and getting help; people are supposedly more aware and engaged in the news updates that are heard globally than they were with the transmissions in the opening of the film. “This isn’t the end,” Lane asserts. “Not even close…we’ve lost entire cities. We still don’t know how it started. We bought ourselves some time…if you can fight, fight. Help each other. Be prepared for anything. Our war has just begun.”

In the background humans unite, mass graveyards of zombies are burned, a football stadium is annihilated by nuclear weapon against the backdrop of swelling, inspiring, hopeful music. In one scene where survivors direct flamethrowers against the swarms of zombies scaling a wall, the scene in Jerusalem is recalled and the merit of segregation, militarization, and the policing of boundaries is hailed as triumph for humanity. The use of such weapons, of course, is legitimated here because the ‘other’ is apparently so definitive. The environmental images from the opening sequence are missing from this final sequence, reinforcing the idea that nature is the enemy of the human; having been bested, its aggressive overtures can be ignored. However, just as the opening sequence emphasized entertainment media as a distraction from ecological concerns, the final sequence that shows us humans winning the

---

numbers of people” (Pokomowski 226). Some of these bleaker—and more familiar—demonstrations of human depravity in zombie apocalypses were apparently cut from the film. In these sequences, Lane and Segan end up drafted in Moscow’s zombie-clearing squad, Karin ends up selling her body as the only recourse for survival in Lane’s absence, there is no cure or safe haven, and the film ends with Lane, now himself displaced, storming across the United States to get his wife back. See Schaefer.

74 This statement keeps the narrative door for a sequel wide open, and indeed, according to the Internet Movie Database, WWZ 2 is currently being scripted.
zombie war is a patriotic spin that directs attention away from the problematic depiction and treatment of ethnic minorities and non-American nationalities—not to mention the betrayal of Lane by the United Nations when they attempt to exile his family from the U.S.S. Argus—to emphasize American triumph over the global zombie war. As I have already pointed out, however, the film may try to re-assert American exceptionalism and anthropocentrism, but it has already opened a door of critical reflection that demonstrates that this re-assertion does not and cannot hold; that perhaps it should not hold.

14 years after 9/11, Lane’s voice in the triumphant closing scene is a rallying cry, a narrative that deflects and defers terror and re-assures the United States of its potency, heroism and resiliency. The war that has just begun, that is far from over, cannot help but invoke the “War on Terror”: as Anna Froula puts it, “the post 9/11 cycle of zombie films evokes the compulsive and repetitive nature of trauma which, at its core, is that which cannot be articulated or assimilated into personal history as non-traumatic experiences are” (196), yet this film suggests it is a war America is winning. Lane’s warning to be prepared for anything echoes the 2002 National Strategy for Homeland Security, which called on every citizen to defend the homeland. As Christopher Zealand observes, the plan stated that “we remain a Nation at war…new enemies may emerge” and “the United States will confront the threat of terrorism in the foreseeable future” (238). Part of this preparation has been realized via organizations like Zombie Squad, a tongue-in-cheek organization founded in 2003 to promote emergency preparation and survival skills in the face of natural or human-made disasters (240). While not directly addressing 9/11, WWZ provides a narrative that promotes a sense of hope and courage rather than passive loss and destruction, like other films that emphasized heroism and revenge such as Black Hawk Down (2001) and Behind Enemy Lines.
(2001), which appealed to a sense of American strength, courage, and solidarity that in the world of Hollywood genre, would always bring a sense of closure and safety to its audiences. In Brooks’ novel this appeal to American exceptionalism is mocked. When Ernesto Olguin recalls an inspirational speech by the United States president in the novel World War Z, he calls it “typically Norteamericano, reaching for the stars with their asses still stuck in the mud”, and claims that “if this was a gringo movie, you’d see some idiot get up and start clapping slowly, then the others would join and then we’d see a tear roll down someone’s cheek or some other contrived bullshit like that” (“Around the World and Above” 191). This is, in effect, exactly what the viewer gets at the end of the film version, although by Lane’s admission that they have yet to find the cause of the virus: threats are always imminent.

According to Derrida, the United States, like its enemies, has a vested interest in exposing its vulnerability, and the result is a threat whose virtuality is the root of fright and terror and a terrorism that endlessly announces itself.75 There is an inherent threat of 9/11 in terms not of the past or the present, but of what may come in the future that may be even worse: a wary sort of anticipation and fear that Derrida calls a trauma whose temporality proceeds from “an im-presentable to come (à venir)” (97). For an event or a loss to be mourned, it must be put to rest, but the living dead prevent such closure. Despite Hollywood’s patriotic filter, through which film and media attempt to unite a deeply divided America and emphasize heroism, family, bravery, courage, benevolence, and a solid stance in the face of threat, the zombie figure even in World War Z forecloses this work of mourning, for as the “fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture,” zombies, like the repetitive name/date of 9/11 itself, keep coming back to threaten the living “because they were not properly buried” (Žižek “The

---

Real and its Vicissitudes” 22). Beneath the veneer of the reified human subject and a whole, healed America post 9/11, WWZ is a film fraught with conflicting notions of humanism, patriotism, and environmentalism that emerge again and again in zombie films. If we are given to understand and not take for granted that the human figure—a being supposedly separate from and superior to all other beings and the very environment in which it lives—is a fantasy that privileges a few and punishes all others, then it becomes difficult to justify or dismiss the racism, sexism, and speciesism that are a result of endorsing such a figure in WWZ, or in the real world where racialized, displaced peoples take the place of zombies in the minds of Western nations. Rather than acting as closure, the film reveals itself to be a Pandora’s Box of aesthetic ideas of the human: as it attempts to reify the human, it begs questions about the blind acceptance of anthropocentrism that it can neither control nor contain.
Chapter 4 Corporate Maleficence, the Posthuman, and the End of the World in the Resident Evil Film Franchise

“Technology is changing our world, making what was once impossible possible. With technology advancing so rapidly today, imagine what our world will look like…tomorrow.”

-“Resident Evil: Retribution Promo (‘This Is My World’)”

The promotional teaser for Resident Evil: Retribution (2012), the latest installment to date of the popular Resident Evil film franchise, was a SONY product placement advertisement that warned how swiftly technological innovation can transition from being beneficial to devastating. To the upbeat backtrack of The Who’s “Baba O’Riley”, the ‘commercial’ begins with an establishing shot of planet earth and zooms in on a series of smiling young men and women from the United States, Russia, Japan and China, respectively, who are holding various SONY devices: an Xperia phone, a PlayStation Vita game console, and a Tablet S are featured. To convey a product-placement meta-narrative and the far reaching capabilities for communication these devices allow, the camera zooms out to reveal each person on the screen of the next: first, a young white male in Times Square is revealed to be on the screen of a young, blond woman named Ana in Russia, who is on the monitor of a Japanese woman named Yomiko in Tokyo, who is in turn on the screen of a Tablet held by a man named Phang on the Great Wall of China. Each individual proudly announces their name, and that “this is my world,” where “this” presumably refers simultaneously to both the devices they hold and a relative time/space in which such broad reaches in innovation, communication, and virtual interconnectedness have become possible in a capitalistic technological global community. The voiceover asserts that technology has indeed been changing rapidly, broadening what the world will look like in future, and asserting a positive potential for its development regardless of one’s geographical location, ethnicity, or demographic. The advertisement resonates with an audience used to similar
marketing techniques for the iPhone, BlackBerry, Android, and even the Windows “I’m A PC” commercials that featured smiling people with diverse ethnicities in unique settings, but the illusion is promptly shattered when the images transition to a shot of the dark, barren, and nearly dead Earth from space. Rocketed out of an idealized techno-world, the viewer is confronted with unsmiling *Resident Evil* protagonist Alice (Milla Jovovitch) in post-apocalyptic Washington, D.C., barricaded inside the White House while Washington, besieged by zombies, burns in the background. When she states, “my name is Alice, and this is my world,” she becomes spokesperson for *Resident Evil*’s apocalyptic vision and the nearing end of the human race as zombies colonize the Earth.

In this chapter, I am building on the concerns of animalization and dehumanization associated with technological development in order to trouble how anthropocentrism functions as a destructive force in a corporate and capitalist world. Using a posthuman approach, I am drawing attention to the ideological biases and assumptions that underlie patriarchy, and exposing the fantasy behind the human figure as a construction. I argue that based on this construction, atrocious acts of dehumanization that are in turn rooted in speciesism, sexism, and racism are enabled, primarily via capitalism. Using the work of Morton and Braidotti, I will also explore how technological innovation and the apocalypse allow for transformation, mutation, and ontological slippages that undermine the reification of the human figure as well as the zombie figure. If such a reification is not possible, it becomes necessary to question the endorsement of an anthropocentric ideology that is

---

premised upon the idea of ontological certainty, and which allows for the subjugation of other living beings.

In his book *American Zombie Gothic*, Bishop credits what he terms the “zombie renaissance”—the resurgence of the zombie in popular culture—with the emergence of two films in particular: *Resident Evil 1* (2002) and *28 Days Later* in 2002 (“Introduction” 16-17), but credits Romero’s *Land of the Dead* for convincing him that the zombie figure was worthy of further investigation (“Conclusion: The Future Shock” 197). While acknowledging the relevance of Capcom’s video game *Biohazard*—later called *Resident Evil*—in keeping the zombie current throughout the 90s via game culture, Bishop’s excellent study of zombies oddly glosses over *Resident Evil* in favor of Romero’s films. Writing on the undead, Gregory A. Waller devotes only a single chapter of his book to zombies (again, only Romero films need apply), and Kevin J. Wetmore’s *Back From the Dead* only provides an analysis of Romero remakes. The focus on Romero’s canon is a common academic trend, and certainly no comprehensive discussion of zombies can be done without examining Romero, but ignoring the ongoing *Resident Evil* franchise, which has produced five films to date and which continues to enjoy popular and commercial success, is a significant oversight that ignores the evolution of the zombie and its potential as a posthuman, post anthropocentric figure that raises ecological and ethical concerns that swell around technological and bioengineering innovation. Scholars such as Laura Wilson and Stephen Harper tend to focus on *Resident Evil* (2002) and the second installment, *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) and argue rather dismissively that due to problematic racial and gender representations in conjunction with “fun” but trite action-based storylines, the franchise is at best lacking any sort of relevant social commentary, and at worst, as Wilson argues, *Resident Evil* (2002)
upholds “regressive and essentialist notions of race,” which are “thinly veiled via the concept of the liberated progressive woman in film” (“Race, the Other, and Resident Evil” 30). Harper allows that while the films can be seen as products of an “anxious cultural climate” and therefore contain imagery that resonates with the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001, the Resident Evil franchise lacks relevant social criticism when compared to Romero’s work (“‘I Could Kiss You’” 9). Mitchell also makes the spurious claim that although Resident Evil (2002) contains the plot elements for a critique of biocommerce—namely bio-piracy—it is “uninterested in such a critical gesture” (“Sacrifice, Individuation” 143). Such assessments deny a trajectory of both the games and the films that have been released since Apocalypse (2004). Some of this premature and dismissive criticism can be understood given that most critics wrote before the release of Extinction (2004) Afterlife (2010) and Retribution (2012), and thus their readings have limitations insofar as they cannot provide a comprehensive picture of the series’ development. By contrast, I argue that the series offers a complex analytical space to explore the fragility of anthropocentrism and the figure of the human in the context of the end of the world.

Because the series revolves around bioengineering and a viral infection that zombifies and/or mutates subjects, it increasingly stresses the ontological indeterminacy of zombies and humans, which forces us not only to ask “who or what are they?” but also “who (or what) are we?”, and if we cannot agree on the definition of a zombie—living, dead or undead, fast or slow, humanoid, non-human animal, or mutated—the human subject cannot be reified. In other words, the incoherent, unstable ontology of the zombie figure suggests the impermanence if not the impossibility of firm, delineated boundaries. In turn, it follows that the human figure is also permeable and malleable. In discussing the blurring of ontological
lines here, I aim to stress that the fantasy figure of the human is illusory and artificial. This is significant since if the figure of the human cannot be defined, it is difficult to justify the continued oppression and exploitation of those defined as subhuman, abhuman, or inhuman against the figure of the human. Steeped in technological cynicism, *Resident Evil* serves as a barometer for fears of the world ending at the hands of unrestricted technological innovations such as pharmacology, genetics, nanotechnology, and especially viral technology. More, the emphasis on non-human and human experimentation implicitly relies on anthropocentrism, which is in turn based on a fantasy figure of the human that justifies atrocious acts of racism and speciesism. For Best, whose work emphasizes the place of humanity within a continuum of biological development rather than at its pinnacle, “the possibilities of artificial intelligence, robotics, cloning, pharmacology, stem cell research, and genetic modification pose entirely new challenges for attempts to define ‘human’ in fixed and essentialist rather than fluid and plastic terms” (“Minding the Animals”). With its myriad focus on the end of the world, mutating and evolving zombies, cybernetic and skinless monsters that form human/machine/genetic hybrids, a female protagonist that becomes superhuman, and so on, the series is preoccupied with the crossing of ontological boundaries, and as such is not merely concerned with demarcating the monstrous and the human as Stephen Harper suggests (“I Could Kiss You” 10). What is significant, then, is that the apocalyptic context of the series coupled with themes of ongoing transformation signifies that the fantasy figure of the human cannot hold. It follows that the justifications made for racism, speciesism, and sexism that rely on the anthropocentric figure of the human as constant and definable also do not hold.
Primarily, I want to show that the zombie is the quintessential posthuman and post-anthropocentric figure in that it collapses the rigid boundaries that designate the fault lines of life and death, and nature and culture, so that the idea of a universal and delineated human nature loses its ontological authority. Insofar as the human, like the zombie, is engaged in a series of becomings and ontological flexibility, we are in some sense zombies in that what we are is an increasingly complex question. Ultimately, using Braidotti’s framework of Zoe, I want to suggest that as matter, all bodies are ontologically free. In Resident Evil’s slow and traditional—what one might call Romeroian zombies—as well as their latter and faster undead counterparts, one can see Braidotti’s concept of the posthuman at work: Life, or Zoe, is “impersonal”, “inhuman”, monstrous and radically other (131), and is marked by generative vitality and the idea that all matter—living, dead, or otherwise, is ontologically free. In this framework matter is in itself vital, an idea that lives in the figure of the undead; figures which in turn are “dead” matter that is paradoxically ambulatory, and which occupy a liminal space between life and death. Moreover, Resident Evil raises the stakes for the ontological stability of the human figure by introducing undead figures that occupy multiple states of being at once: the Majini zombies, which I will discuss in the following section, are not just undead, they embody non-human animal as well as human animal appendages such as their flowering tentacle mouths, and take on the ability to tunnel like moles. Not only do they stress the collapse of an ontological divide between life and death, but between human and non-human. Starting with the zombies but certainly not ending there, the many altered and changing bodies in Resident Evil serve to further emphasize that in the midst of its apocalyptic vision, all bodies are posthuman in that they are composed of ontologically free matter that is never in stasis and is not reifiable. Moreover, I argue that the zombies’ variant
and shifting physical forms, particularly at those moments when the change is immediately visible and transgresses boundaries—for instance, when a zombie opens its mouth and tentacles emerge as if from nowhere—suggests that they embody the ontological instability that is one of the posthuman’s defining features. Although the zombies are the basis for my argument, I will also argue that the franchise constructs and then systematically destabilizes a caricaturized figure of the human via the white, male, and able-bodied executives and scientists of Umbrella in varying degrees of success, in order to stress that anthropocentrism (and the atrocities done in the name of human exceptionalism) is not an ideology we can continue to, or afford to, endorse when ontological boundaries are consistently blurred between human and animal, human and zombie, and life and death. Creating false binaries between categories like “human” and “animal” is also to ignore a multiplicity of differences both within and between them: humans are different from each other, and the word “animals” too is a blanket term that fails to acknowledge the differences within and between species and individual animals. These categories of being are entirely artificial in that they enforce some differences—in the favor of anthropocentrism—while aggressively ignoring others. That we can no longer endorse anthropocentrism is particularly true when in the context of the apocalypse in Resident Evil—which I will frame and analyze using the final scene of Retribution and via Morton’s notion of the charnel ground—survivors are faced with apocalypse that is happening and still yet to come, like the posthuman itself.

Despite claims of banality from critics, the popularity of the Resident Evil film franchise to date is a testament to its ongoing resonance in popular culture. The film franchise is preoccupied with the inexorable destruction of humanity as well as the more-than-human world caused by corporate intervention in genetics, pharmacology, and
bioweaponry. As such, the Umbrella Corporation is a symbolic nightmare vision of real companies that might bring the world to an end. In none of the research on the film series is there a consideration of the Umbrella Corporation or an analysis of the men who run it, but it is integral to understanding the intellectual project of the film: to assert that in the service of an anthropocentrism that refuses to practice mindfulness towards other living things and the planet, and to see itself on a charnel ground, Umbrella represents all companies—such as Monsanto—that develop such innovations. As a corporation Umbrella commodifies and then consumes all animate and inanimate things under its far-reaching metaphorical ribs and canopy and is thus pointedly synonymous with the endlessly consuming zombies it is responsible for creating. Thus, there is an interesting tension here in that Umbrella is clearly a destructive company, and yet as part of the corporate, capitalist world, it contributes to the creation of the posthuman zombie which is itself an irreconcilably damaging yet progressive figure. The significance of the corporation’s emblematic umbrella is an important one that should not be overlooked. Superficially it signals protection for those it covers: in the opening scene of the first film, in the opening scene that the Umbrella Corporation’s political and financial influence is felt everywhere, and 9 out of every 10 homes in the United States contain its products. It is the world’s leading supplier of medical technology, healthcare, and computer technology, and as such is both ubiquitous and pivotal in the lives of everyday people. While Umbrella markets itself as a company that shelters the public, to be under its protection is to be inescapably and insidiously under its control. Viewers learn in *Resident Evil 1* that despite its benign self-presentation, the company secretly profits from military technology, genetic experimentation, and viral weaponry, so that there is much at stake.
domestically and worldwide from an ethically corrupt company whose ‘umbrella’ covers the globe.

I suggest that the image of unethical companies making gross ethical and innovative errors is meant to resonate: as Resident Evil I producer Bernd Eichinger comments in 2002, “as we speak I am sure that around the world there are tests made with animals and genetic tests and we all know that they can go terribly wrong; and that’s really what the movie is all about” (Resident Evil DVD Commentary). Of course, at issue here is that Eichinger’s comment implies that experiments and genetic tests on animals can also go “right” rather than wrong, or in other words, the experimentation done on animals is fine until something happens that negatively impacts humans. In addition, the ongoing and government funded bioengineering research that is intentionally carried out, rather than having gone awry, is consciously changing the genetic structure of agriculture as well as that of non-humans for transgenetic purposes. For instance, transgenetic modifications are used to ostensibly improve farm animals for human consumption by making them grow bigger and at a faster rate, to create hypo-allergenic pets, and to serve as model organisms in which to study disorders or trigger genes responsible for disease. At the heart of such research is a denial of the dignity and rights of non-human animals, and indeed, to be concerned primarily with human well-being means a corresponding lack of concern for the well-being of non-human

---

Eichinger acknowledges a worldwide tendency to experiment on non-human animals for the benefit of humans. In positing that such testing can go “terribly wrong”, he implies that insofar as things do not go wrong, some bioengineering with regards to non-human animals might be acceptable. Moreover, Resident Evil contextualizes things as having gone wrong only when the T-Virus affects human life; the lives of the Umbrella Corporation’s typical test subjects—Dobermans and rabbits—are negligible. Problematically then, Eichinger reinforces a humanist and speciesist axiology where human life is privileged at the expense of all others. As scholars such as Cary Wolfe, Jacques Derrida, and others have extensively argued, defining the human subject in contrast to the animal and the animalistic is reductionist and serves a speciesist, sexist, and racist symbolic economy in which a rigidly defined minority is able to exploit and devalue all those it considers to be other.
animals or of the planet. After all, if the films—particularly the first one—are about genetic tests and experiments on non-human animals, they tap into a growing and uncomfortable awareness that such tests rely on the objectification of non-humans. This objectification in turn is not possible unless some lives and interests—human lives and interests in particular—are considered more valuable than others. In *Resident Evil*, this logic is quickly applied by Umbrella scientists and executives to other humans in the film, most of whom ultimately become zombies. In challenging the ideological biases of anthropocentrism that allow speciesism and racism to persist, it is the zombies themselves that call the figure of the human into question, and which signal, in *Resident Evil* in particular, the coming of the posthuman.

**Stumbling, Running, Tunneling Forward: *Resident Evil* Zombie Evolution and Posthumanism**

In *Resident Evil*, the zombie is a figure of becoming itself. It is actively evolving within one narrative trajectory rather than just across generations of films since the late 1960s that reproduce or reimagine Romero’s figure. In fact, their ontological indeterminacy is rather the point: *Resident Evil*’s numerous zombie types over the course of the series have varying degrees of mobility, mutated non-human animal appendages, and both physical and basic intellectual capabilities, which makes it impossible to define the zombie and impossible, then, to define the human against it. To my mind, these myriad zombie types, including Romero’s well-known, shambling ghoul—which as a liminal figure between life and death is always already an ontologically complex figure—work to unsettle the illusory divide between “us” and “them” by revealing the instability of concepts like human, zombie, and animal and suggesting that claims to the ontological integrity of these terms are
disingenuous. From slow to fast to mutated, the zombies of *Resident Evil* are not as easily recognizable as Dendle and Christie suggest when they claim that we know a zombie when we see one, insofar as the criteria that defines it is constantly changing.\(^78\)

In *Resident Evil 1* the zombies closely resemble Romero’s zombies: they shamble slowly but purposefully after Alice and her companions, much as Romero’s zombies stumble in suits, house-coats, and every day attire after the living.\(^79\) In the four sequels that follow *Resident Evil 1*, in fact, Anderson pays homage to the archetypal zombie popularized by Romero and invokes some of the figure’s complex intertextuality. For instance, *Apocalypse* features a scene in which Alice, Jill Valentine (Sienna Guillory), her partner Peyton (Razaaq Adoti), and news anchor Terri Morales (Sandrine Holt) cut through a foggy graveyard in their endeavors to escape the zombie-infested Raccoon City after the T-Virus escapes the Hive in the first film.\(^80\) The grotesquely decayed and moldering undead claw their way from the earth much as they do in Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*. In *Afterlife*, there are two references to Romero in one scene: as Alice searches for life in Los Angeles via a small plane, she spots survivors on the roof of a prison surrounded by zombies. A high angle shot reveals the survivors beneath a tattered American flag, echoing a similar shot above the rural Pennsylvanian graveyard in *Night of the Living Dead*. Across the rooftop in white paint are the words “help us,” referring to the same phrase on the mall rooftop in *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) and repeating the motif of America as graveyard. Romero’s influence is clearly felt, yet despite the intertextuality of the zombie, Anderson rejected Romero’s film script for the

---

\(^78\) See Deborah Christie, “A Dead New World,” 71.

\(^79\) This is true in all Romero films, including *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Day of the Dead*, *Land of the Dead*, and *Diary of the Dead*.

\(^80\) The Hive is Umbrella’s secret underground Raccoon City facility in *Resident Evil 1*, where the company conducts its illegal experiments and develops bioweaponry, such as the T-Virus. Its entrance is hidden in an above ground mansion.
first *Resident Evil* film because he wanted to avoid the zombie archetype of the 1970s and 1980s that Romero created (Lukas “Horror Video Game Remakes” 235). While the first film still features the slow zombie from Romero’s vision, they are the result of a manmade virus rather than radiation and comprise only a fraction of the horrors that escape the Hive. Although Lukas correctly observes that the zombie figure is “conditioned by the previous versions that have been imagined” (233), I argue that in *Resident Evil* the zombies become less knowable as zombies (insofar as Romero has defined them): for instance, in *Apocalypse* many have regained the ability to run. In the opening scene of *Apocalypse*, the viewer is immersed in a frantic chase scene in which a lone woman is pursued by zombies up the service stairs of a building. The scene is characterized by quick cuts, blurred and jerky motion, and shifts between low and high angle shots on the stairwell that oscillate between the zombies’ point of view—from which we see a simultaneously tantalizing and horrifying view of the woman’s legs, so bare and vulnerable and almost within the zombies’ reach—and an overhead perspective on her progress. The overall impression is one of dizzying panic and zombie acceleration, particularly since when the woman is finally cornered, it is only the motion of the zombies that is blurred to indicate their increased speed; a surprising development given the slowness of zombies in the first film.

Marking the most significant change in the zombie figure in the series, the zombies of *Afterlife* are Majini zombies; which according to the *Resident Evil Wiki*, were theorized in a draft script of the film as zombies further mutated by the T-Virus. Majini zombies appear like typical zombies, but their mouths split into a sort of flowering, tentacle-like maw, and they

---

81 The transition from slow to fast zombies and the implications of that change are discussed in Chapter 5.
are capable of swimming and tunneling (“Majini Zombies: Origin”). When they are first introduced in a shower room scene in *Afterlife*, their appearance is even more of a surprise to the viewer than the fast zombies of *Apocalypse*: in this scene, while Alice is occupied with confronting a would-be peeping Tom, the viewer sees the man’s eyes widen before the shot reverses to reveal a zombie behind Alice’s shoulder; her face is out of focus and viewer attention is drawn to the bloody maw of the zombie’s mouth as it unexpectedly and surprisingly opens to reveal emerging tentacles. While Alice manages to shoot it, the camera shifts to show yet another Majini zombie, from Alice’s point of view, running full-speed towards her with a sense of co-ordination and purpose that the zombies of *Apocalypse* distinctly lack. Once she has managed to kill it, Alice turns in time for the viewer to see a pair of Majini zombie legs disappear from view as it escapes through the tunnel from which it emerged. Most telling about this scene is the subsequent look on Alice’s face in a close up: shock, disgust, and confusion play across her face as she attempts to process what she has just witnessed, since everything she (and the viewer) has assumed about zombies is undermined in an instant. Not only are these zombies capable of extreme speed, agility, tunneling, and ambush, they have non-human animal appendages. These zombies are suggestive in that they indicate the zombie figure in general is a subject not of ontological stasis but, rather, of becoming, and all due to innovations in biotechnology. From an evolutionary perspective, this constant becoming is significant in that it demonstrates the zombie figure’s tendency to change and evolve along with the changing technologies around it, so that the figure’s increased speed indicates an epistemic shift concerning the zombie.

---

82 The Majini of the film appear to be different than those of the games, which are sometimes created by injecting the Las Plagas parasite into a living human in order to take control of them. In *Retribution*, an evil clone of Rain Ocampo deliberately injects herself with the Las Plagas parasite, making her nearly invincible. To avoid confusion, I am focusing on the film canon.
rather than simply a reflection of computer-generated effects that simply enable spectacle. In turn, this constant change prevents reification of the zombie and attests to its posthumanity, which is heralded not by stasis, but by mutability. It should also be kept in mind that as a being that reproduces itself rapidly and efficiently via a mere bite or scratch, the zombie is a perfectly adapted figure in that it is extremely successful at achieving its evolutionary goal of replication and increased variation: as Darwin argues, “every single organic being around us may be said to be striving to the utmost to increase in numbers” (“Struggle for Existence” 43), a goal the zombie accomplishes with ease.

In Resident Evil, the first on-screen zombie is discovered by Rain Ocampo (Michelle Rodriguez) in the first film. It and the other zombies are represented in such a way that the tension between defining them as human or defining them as monster is explored in order to conclude—problematically and reductively—that the human is located in the monster. It is useful to point out this interpretation, but I will use it as a springboard via which to complicate this reading of the zombie. Due to the appearance and dress of the zombie Rain encounters—“she” is wearing a lab coat—Rain mistakes “her” for a living survivor of the Hive until the zombie bites her, and other zombies in various states of decay suddenly materialize.\textsuperscript{83} Despite being somehow dead and yet reanimated, and kinetic yet in various states of decay, these figures reflect the visage, physical form, and clothing of their living selves so that the implication is clear yet perplexing: they are us, and yet somehow are not. For we are not ourselves, as posthumanist theory elucidates. After narrowly escaping this first attack, Rain attempts to reconcile her confusion by conceptualizing the zombies as

\textsuperscript{83} This is not unlike Johnny and Barbra in Night of the Living Dead, who mistake the zombie in the graveyard for another man visiting until it is too late.
something other: they do not die when shot anywhere but the head, their blood does not coagulate, and therefore they are not human. She claims “whatever they are, there’s too many of them out there,” implying that Rain is unable or unwilling to define them in terms of similarity to the living, and instead focuses on their difference. However, her colleague Kaplan (Martin Crewes) shatters her attempt to dehumanize them when he exclaims, “Whatever they are? It’s pretty obvious what they are! Lab coats, badges…those people used to work here!” In referring to the zombies as people, Kaplan undermines one of the unspoken rules of zombie films: they are almost never referred to as zombies, and they are certainly never referred to as humans but as ‘things.’

The same, notably, is true of non-human animals, who are deprived of individuality. Therefore, a parallel between non-human animals and zombies can be seen in the way they are both strategically objectified, which, in turn, allows similarities between the human and non-human that threaten the human figure as separate from and superior to non-humans to be ignored. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of Resident Evil in this moment ensures that the viewer is forced to acknowledge, as Kaplan does, that despite being undead and ostensibly non-sentient, zombies are physically recognizable as human in form. Even after defining them as things, for instance, Rain is bitten by her former friend J.D. (Pasquale Aleardi) because she ironically refuses to see that he is a zombie despite having witnessed him being attacked and eaten.

---

84 Scott Lukas also notes that people and dogs zombified in Resident Evil are referred to as things (“Horror Video Game Remakes” 235). It is a provocative point that as formulaic as zombie films/literature are, characters almost never know what is happening, what a zombie is, or how to kill a zombie. While other horror subgenres, such as the vampire film, often acknowledge the vampire and how it is killed as common knowledge, such intertextuality within zombie films is often lacking. Presumably, part of the appeal for such films/stories is the failure of human communication, infrastructure, and general knowledge that would allow people to remain in control of the situation. Nevertheless, it is ironic given that in real life, many websites are devoted to developing actual contingency plans in the event of a zombie apocalypse, suggesting hyperawareness of the figure in western culture that is not seen in the films themselves.

85 The inevitability of a bitten loved one slowly (or quickly) becoming a zombie is ubiquitous in zombie films, and cannot help but highlight the fragility of what is means to be defined as human.
argued, “the horror of the zombie movie comes from recognizing the human in the monster” ("Raising the Dead" 201), which implies that the fault line between human and monster is actually more porous than impenetrable. This is a fairly obvious observation, however, and what I want to focus on here is how the zombie undermines humanist notions of normativity because it is already a transitional figure in the series, and being living-dead is a contradictory state of being that defies easy definition.

The zombie figure in Resident Evil asserts itself as endlessly mutating and thus ontologically indeterminate even as it already inhabits a liminal space between life and death. Before elaborating on the mutating zombies, I first want to suggest that Resident Evil’s typical and slow undead are an important part of the transition to faster, more mutable zombies, in that they undermine human exceptionalism by reminding us that the human animal is rooted to corporeality and to a mortality that it cannot transcend. In other words, despite moves to other the zombie and elevate the human in the process—as Rain attempts to do—the zombie’s anatomical likeness to humans impedes such a separation. Further, these zombies and the faster, more violent, ‘animalized’ zombies from Apocalypse onwards underscore a representation of zombies as animals that ultimately seeks and fails to define animality in opposition to humanity. Ultimately, this failure highlights an inability to ontologically determine the zombie and animal, and so the human figure too is under duress. Wolfe claims that “‘the human’ is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether” (“What is Posthumanism?” xv). However, the dead body, the corpse, and the zombie all emphasize the materiality and physicality of the body; more, they confront us with the inevitability of our own individual aging process, the
failure of biological systems and organs, our own abjection, or, in other words, the fact that we are inextricably bound by embodiment and the physical limitations it imposes. Kristeva articulates the fear and disgust bound up in the corpse, and, by extension, the zombie, when she claims that “corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live…the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything” (“Approaching Abjection” 3-4). The zombie, of course, and the virus in Resident Evil that animates it, is situated firmly in the body, which itself refuses to lie still and insists on “encroach[ing] upon everything” (3-4). The T-Virus is a living organism that is responsible for neurological, chemical and physical changes in the living or dead flesh it infects, and nobody in the film series is immune to it.

The zombie figure exploits and confirms a distrust of the human body because it is a testament to the body’s inevitable failure—that is, its gradual deterioration as it ages, and its eventual decay. On the one hand, zombies rather convincingly remind the viewer of their own physical limitations. The gory scenes of zombie films emphasize the reality of embodiment in regards to physical vulnerability. Because the living and the undead share the same anatomy, organs and viscera, it is impossible to see the zombie just in terms of its inhuman difference as compared to the living. As Dendle asserts, “the zombies not only reveal human protagonists to be made of flesh, sinew and bone by unravelling them unceremoniously, but wear in their own features the biological anatomy of the human animal” (183). Held together tenuously by rotting tissues, riddled with lacerations and slowed by missing or mutilated, limbs, filthy and stinking, zombies reveal the eventual decline of every human body. That zombies remain ambulatory, however, suggests that on the other hand, their liminal state as un-dead complicates notions about life and what it means to be
living or dead. The decaying zombie body contradicts the notion that human ‘life’ is somehow superior to and more resilient than other ‘life’: bacteria, worms, and insects all render the corpse a seething mass of life beyond the death of the individual. In other words, despite the tendency of humans to view their lives as individually determined and guided by some sort of purpose, Life itself refuses individuality; Life, per se, is neither ego-driven nor specific to “the human,” but is greater than the sum of its parts. Complicating the matter further is a contradiction implicit in the zombie figure itself: one the one hand, it indicates that the human animal—a subject bound in flesh just as non-human animals are—is not only rather un-remarkable, but has also grossly overestimated its own uniqueness. The zombie figure paradoxically resists a turn to definitive ontology and categorization since it is both living and dead. Indeed, as I discussed in the introduction, insofar as Braidotti describes Zoe as impersonal life, generative vitality, and insofar as matter is ontologically free, all zombies reveal the ideological and, thus, conceptual biases and limits of the human. In Resident Evil in particular, the zombie is a figure in flux. As zombies become increasingly agile, mobile, and mutated throughout the films, they emphasize the limits of anthropocentrism that in turn maintains that categories—human and non-human, living and dead, human and animal, for instance—are, will, and can remain separate. In the process, they foreground the ways in which “the human” has been problematically determined by relying on essentialist representations of “the animal.” My intention here is not to resolve the contradiction that the zombie figure creates by virtue of anchoring “the human” to the body or destabilizing “the human” by turns—the contradiction cannot be resolved—but rather, to explore the contradiction because it prevents a reification of the animal, the zombie, and especially the human. As such, appeals to the absolutism of the human and anthropocentrism—which
depend on exclusionary terms and justify atrocious treatment based on sexism, speciesism, and racism—reveal themselves to be contentious insofar as they are socially, historically, and politically, rather than naturally, constructed.

While a more thorough analysis of the implications of the ‘animalized’ and fast zombie can be found in Chapter 5, it is worth some discussion at this juncture since as Wolfe notes, the question of the animal is key in a discussion of the posthuman (What Is Posthumanism? xxii), particularly since the ‘human,’ has been constructed in part by defining itself against non-human animals and biological urges associated with them. The zombie modus operandi revolves around the most basic of biological imperatives: eating. This is interesting since while auteurs of the sub-genre could have attributed any number of biological processes to the zombie—the elimination of digested food, for instance, or sex—it is the endless urge to consume that characterizes the zombie. Representationally, the image of an insatiable maw is associated with non-human animals such as sharks and other large predators rather than humans, yet the zombie figure re-imagines the metaphor of a maw as belonging to the human animal rather than the non-human animal. Reversing the assumption that animals are ravenous and violent as opposed to humans encourages a rethinking of how animality is a term used politically to maintain the position of “the human” as civilized and superior; being able to keep its “appetites” under control, and yet the zombified human suggests that the opposite is true. In relation to zombies, the desire to separate “the human” from “the animal” is fraught. Best argues in terms of humanism and in contrast to “the animal”, “humans want to be ensouled, immortal, and privileged in some way...[they want] to be radically unique in their reason and self-consciousness, and to exist as stunningly singular in their possession of free will” (“Minding the Animals”) but, as has been said of
“the animal” by scholars like Descartes, the zombie has no soul, no free will, no intelligence, and is certainly not immortal. For Descartes, animals were simply natural automata; machines to which humans owe no moral consideration since in his estimation, unlike humans, animals lack minds, reason, and language (“Animals are Machines” 281-285). This argument has been vehemently refuted by many scholars, including Charles Darwin, who argues in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* that actions of all kinds that regularly accompany a state of a mind are considered as expressive. Moreover, these expressions of a state of mind are demonstrated by both human and non-human animals, which suggests that animals indeed have minds to express. Darwin juxtaposes the wagging of a dog’s tail to demonstrate its happiness, the use of vocal cords in general to communicate thoughts and feelings, and the shrugging of the shoulders in humans as an expression of doubt or indifference as examples of expressive action (“Chapter XIV” 350) so that it is clear that humans are not the sole possessors of mind, reason, or language. In Darwin’s words, “[t]hat the chief expressive actions, exhibited by man and by the lower animals, are now innate or inherited—that is, have not been learnt by the individual—is admitted by every one” (351), so that humans have no claim to uniqueness based on their ability to express their minds and emotions via expressive actions. Darwin’s reference to non-human animals as “lower animals” is an assumption that I am calling into question, but his assertion that non-human animals display their emotions via expressive actions that in turn transgress species barriers indicates that that they do indeed possess minds, reason, and language. Further, contemporary scholars like Wolfe point out that denying moral consideration or sentience to animals based on a lack of reason or language capacity is logically unsound. Wolfe cites a PBS series on the “‘animal mind’” in particular that has demonstrated that such supposed
distinctive marks of the human “flourish quite reliably beyond the species barrier”
(“Introduction” Animal Rites 2). That is to say, attempts to define human against animal
based on the capacity for language, thought, tool use, reason, and the like are fallacious.
Insofar as the zombie is representationally equated with the animal in Resident Evil, attempts
to reify the human figure by contrast to the zombie/animal prove likewise fallacious. The
increased predatory nature of Resident Evil zombies from Apocalypse onwards identifies
them as other insofar as they are animalized, but in a specific context: the viewer is primed to
see the contemporary zombie as analogous to a large, stealthy, and fast predator. They move
rapidly, but only when chasing living prey, they increasingly emit growls and chittering
sounds rather than moans, and are altogether more vital than their slower counterparts.
Dendle claims that high budget features make zombies faster in an attempt to make them
appear more human (180), but as I am endeavoring to show, what constitutes the ‘human’ is
not only problematic, but clearly, a mis/representation of the ‘nature’ of animals—and only
certain predatory animals in a predator-prey context—is being used in Resident Evil and
other films in a way that paradoxically defines the zombie as an Other to the human because
the zombie is animalized in terms of its violent behavior.

To animalize the zombie is to trivialize, efface, and deny the emotional and
intellectual complexity of non-human life, and it also distracts from the violence enacted by
self-appointed humans in Resident Evil, like Dr. Issacs (Iain Glen), the head of Umbrella’s
science division in Extinction who is charged with domesticating the zombies and who
becomes the central antagonist of that film. I use ‘nature’ here while acknowledging the
problems of essentializing the human, the animal, or even the zombie, since as Jacques
Derrida reminds us, “the animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a
name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other” (23). It is no coincidence that Issacs refers to his zombie test subjects as animals in *Extinction*. He attempts to “domesticate” them in order to allow Umbrella’s return to the Earth’s surface, to establish a rudimentary workforce, and to manipulate and experiment on them with greater ease. Issacs plans to do this by taking away the zombies’ aggression and need to consume, but confidently claims that still, “they’ll never be human.” The intended use of zombies parallels the use of domesticated animals for food and labour that exist beyond the film world. Moreover, Issacs’ words here reveal the speciesism behind human exceptionalism. To reiterate, speciesism refers to the belief that one species is superior to all others, which conveniently endows humans with more value than other species and which in turn justifies negative treatment and representation of said species. This is to say that speciesist ideology serves to secure the human subject as somehow above aggressive behavior and instinctual impulses, and non-human animals as somehow unable to demonstrate empathy, intelligence, or reason. Considering how Issacs treats all other life forms, it is clear that this desire to separate the ‘animal’ qualities from human ones (and thus the ‘animal’ qualities of the zombies from the qualities of the living) are doomed to fail. This inability to maintain ontological stability is made starkly clear through *Resident Evil: Afterlife* and *Resident Evil: Retribution*’s Majini zombies, who have non-human animal appendages such as tentacle-mouths. They are simultaneously infected, mutated, dead, alive, human, and non-human animal, forming a genetically and biologically distinct figure that is in constant flux; becoming and thus disavowing the segregation of species that has long helped to maintain the figure of the human. There are many co-existing kinds of zombies in the *Resident Evil* world: fast, slow, mutated, swimming, running, and even gun wielding, motorcycle riding, soldier
zombies in *Retribution*. They demonstrate the diversity within and between zombies and thus imply the impossibility of identifying them by a stable set of characteristics. This multiplicity and permeability of identity and identification also marks the zombies as posthuman if they can be considered, as Braidotti suggests of all matter, as “ontologically free” (“Post Anthropocentrism” 56), as humans and non-human animals are as well. Since they bring about and exist after the end of the world, the zombies are also post-anthropocentric: they eradicate most of the human population and pave the way for a new undead world, for better or worse.

In *Resident Evil*, the T-Virus infects and zombifies animals such as crows and lab dogs as well, suggesting an eventual strange and rather cynical world in which speciesism, sexism, anthropocentrism, and racism might cease to exist if all former living things—human and non-human alike—become zombies. Harper complains that *Resident Evil* zombies in the first two installments are merely backdrop for the action of the films, and that the films do not address “the possibility that ‘we’ might be morally equivalent to, or even worse than, ‘them’” (10), and in part he is correct. Instead, *Resident Evil* comprehensively nullifies this possibility because it seeks to collapse the binaries between “us” and “them”, confronting the instability of terms such as human, zombie, and animal throughout and asserting—though not without problems—that these ontological determinants do not hold.

---

86 Other films have explored the idea of the soldier zombie, *Dead Snow* (2009), a Norwegian film in which vacationing students are hunted by Nazi zombies on the slopes of Norway.

87 This is especially true of *28 Days Later* (2002) in which the zombies are not dead at all, and over which fans have fought bitterly and vehemently over whether the infected are actually zombies.
Under the Umbrella of Humanism: Undermining Umbrella’s Human Subject

What many scholarly assertions about zombies and zombie films have in common is a way of talking about “the human” and “the zombie” that re-essentializes who “they” and “us” are; that is, a commonly understood, well-defined and infallible category with an infallible ontology. Gregory A. Waller references an interview with Romero, who affirms that zombies are the neighbors: “the living dead never cease to look like—and therefore in some fashion to be?—human beings. After all, most Americans are flesh eaters”88 (“Land of the Living Dead” 277). Waller claims that the fitness of man can be measured in Night, and is found wanting (281). Embedded in Waller’s rhetoric and the rhetoric of other scholars are assumptions about what it means to be human; the fitness of ‘man’ in particular reifies the human as male, and in the context of Romero’s films and many others, white.89 What Resident Evil provides by contrast is a critical space in which to examine the frailty of its key villains—Umbrella’s North American Operations Director and Vice President in Charge of Operations, Major Cain (Thomas Kretschmann) in Apocalypse, Dr. Issacs, and Albert Wesker, Chairman and CEO of Umbrella (Jason O’Mara in Extinction, Shawn Roberts in Afterlife)90—who are caricatures of the figure of the human that the legacy of the Enlightenment defines as white, male, and able bodied. These individuals, over the course of

88 It may be worth pointing out here that flesh eating might be a social and cultural rather than a natural phenomenon. This is the case with the zombie figure itself, which became cannibalistic in Romero’s films.
89 A common claim cited by many scholars is that more than any other monster-type, zombies do not resemble us but actually are us. Douglas E. Cowan nods towards the ‘they are us’ argument of other scholars in Sacred Terror, and claims that zombies are not monsters as much as they are friends, neighbors, family, and even pets (“Stalking Life” 153).
90 Cain is the main antagonist in Apocalypse, and according to the Resident Evil Wiki, he is responsible for sending the team of operatives that investigated the Hive in the first film, and for re-opening it at the beginning of Apocalypse. Issacs is responsible for the experimentations conducted on Matt and Alice in Apocalypse. Wesker is introduced as the main antagonist of the series from the end of Extinction on.
the series, have a self-appointed right to be considered human as opposed to all others beings, which Umbrella views as objects and commodities. By framing these men as the hyperbolization of a rigid, patriarchal human figure, the film enables a critical space in which to question the ideological assumptions behind the figure of the human; namely, that all other life exists for benefit of this exclusionary subject.

In all of the films, Cain, Issacs, and Wesker, via the Umbrella Corporation, are responsible for subjugating both ‘human’ and non-human subjects to illegal and grotesque experimentation for commercial profit and self-benefit, which can only be achieved by marking other living beings in terms of difference, and subsequently objectifying them. This exploitation and objectification is carried out at length over the course of the Resident Evil film series via the system of biocommerce, which Mitchell argues has violence and injustice at its heart. In the first film, the viewer is made aware of Umbrella’s animal testing in two brief cases. In one, Alice has a brief flashback of seeing a white rabbit first injected with the T-Virus and then the antidote. Similarly, when the T-Virus first escapes into the air ventilation system of the Hive, the scene shifts to a close up of a Doberman lying behind wire mesh, head on its paws, until it sniffs the T-Virus infected air from an overhead vent, jumps to its feet, and begins to bark furiously. As the camera pulls back, it reveals a row of wire-

91 In “Sacrifice, Individuation, and the Economics of Genomics,” Robert Mitchell argues persuasively that “while the biotechnological and genomic revolutions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have promised—and sometimes delivered—spectacular life-saving and life-extending drugs and procedures, the development and expansion of contemporary biocommerce often has engendered systemic forms of injustice. Patients in the United States who provide rare tissue necessary for the creation of research or therapeutic cell lines, for example, find themselves legally positioned as “raw material” and denied compensation for their corporeal contributions…researchers interested in data from genetically isolated populations have patented gene sequences using questionable informed consent procedures; and the tantalizing promises of the field of regenerative medicine are shadowed by a global network of organ commerce that links impoverished third world ‘donors’ and rich first world recipients. Such instances hint at the troubling possibility that injustice and violence are intrinsic to rather than exceptions within the system of modern biocommerce” (126). Resident Evil explores in part the ways in which biocommerce allows for such injustice, particularly in the way that all life forms, non-human and human alike, are rendered commodities and raw material.
mesh and metal cages—barely big enough for the dogs to turn around and devoid of food, water, bedding, or toys—in which more apprehensive Dobermans, as powerless to escape the pathogen they inhale as they are powerless to escape their fate as lab animals, turn and bark restlessly. What these instances have in common is the relative unimportance of the exploitation of animal life in *Resident Evil 1*. The dogs have no contact with each other or presumably, with humans, until the dogs are experimented on. The Dobermans enjoy not even the smallest of comforts. In the case of the rabbit, Alice’s flashback serves as little more than a brief plot point by which the viewer learns that there is an antivirus, and the way it is glossed over reflects the horrific reality that such experiments are, after all, an everyday reality in labs worldwide. As for the Dobermans, viewers meet them again later in the film in zombified form. Given that most of them appear to have been partially skinned, ribs shining wetly, ears missing, and so on, one is left to speculate that the trapped dogs were subject to substantial pain and torture before their deaths. In one scene, Alice stumbles across their mesh cages, which have ragged escape holes in the wire that are lined with dog flesh, suggesting that in their distress and fear, the dogs maimed themselves in an attempt to escape. Because they re-emerge as zombified animals, or zominals, to coin a term, the potential horror of their final living moments—which happens offscreen—is glossed over as viewer attention is drawn to Alice’s attempts to escape and fight them. However, it remains that the zombie-dogs are unfortunate byproducts and victims of Umbrella’s experiments.

It is, however, worth pointing out that the white rabbit and Alice herself are two of many myriad references to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*; in fact,

---

92 The use of the Doberman as a dog breed for animal experimentation in *Resident Evil* is drawn from the video game of the same name, and likely due to its supposed viciousness. As such, it is a more stereotypically frightening zombified animal for viewers as opposed to the Beagle, which is a breed of choice in labs due to its passivity.
Resident Evil 1 plays extensively with the themes and symbolism of the book, including Alice’s journey down the rabbit hole (the underground Hive), which is in turn run by a homicidal computer AI called the Red Queen. The Queen demonstrates an obsession with decapitation (a female Hive worker is decapitated by an elevator at the start of the first film and the Red Queen demands that Alice decapitate Rain, who has become infected, with an axe in exchange for a security code). More strikingly, Stephen Harper points out that the Red Queen refers to an evolutionary theory of the same name, and which was proposed by Leigh Van Valen in 1973 to describe how “evolutionary systems must continually develop just to maintain their fitness relative to the systems with which they are co-evolving” (“I Could Kiss You” 1). In other words, they must adapt just to survive in an ever changing and hostile environment. Van Valen’s theory obviously owes a debt to Darwin’s theory of natural selection, in which Darwin claims that “if any one species does not become modified and improved in a corresponding degree with its competitors, it will soon be exterminated” (“Natural Selection” 65). In the case of Resident Evil, the figure of the human is pitted against rapidly evolving zombies and monsters, so that it comes closer and closer to extermination within the film narrative. Notably, Teresa de Lauretis chose Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland to introduce a series of considerations on feminism, semiotics, and cinema in her book Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema since for her, the world of the looking-glass is “a world of discourse and asymmetry, whose arbitrary rules” resist easy or natural identification of the subject (Alice) (“Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema” 2). Given how Alice comes to represent a subject that is irrevocably altered by the T-Virus in constantly changing ways, the resonance between Carroll’s narrative and Resident Evil suggests that the film also productively uses the Alice in Wonderland motif to challenge patriarchy, and by extension,
the fantasy figure of the human. How Alice does so is a subject I will turn to shortly in this chapter.

It is only when the company is revealed to be subjecting “humans” to experimentation that the horror of the everyday practices that victimize non-human animals resonates for viewers. One scene in particular from *Resident Evil 1* epitomizes this horror: at the end of the film (and shown again for narrative continuity at the beginning of *Apocalypse*), a low angle shot reveals Alice in the center of an empty, blindingly white sterile room atop a steel table, attached to various intravenous T virus drips, unconscious and naked save for a cursory paper sheet covering her breasts and genital area. The room looks large and imposing over her vulnerable form, and when she wakes and sees herself reflected in a two-way mirror, she screams in horror and revulsion as she wrenches the IVs out of her arms and her partially shaven scalp. She falls weakly to the floor, offering a glimpse of her genital area, but given her many bruises, bleeding wounds, and unwashed hair, the scene is neither titillating nor fetishized. Alice is coded as an object of experimentation, and her desperate cries to be let out are ignored. This scene begins with an extreme close up of one of Alice’s opening eyes and parallels the introduction to her character at the beginning of the film when she wakes partially covered by a shower curtain in a marble shower. Stephen Harper argues that this moment serves as a gratuitous hypersexualization (“I Could Kiss You” 2), but I contend that the narrative encourages the notion that Alice, like the Dobermans and the rabbit, is coded as raw material for commodification and experimentation by Umbrella. The viewer later learns that is it Dr. Issacs who is responsible for the experiments on Alice and other human subjects, such as the Lickers, which are distinguished by their un-naturally long tongues. Created by injecting the T-Virus into living human tissue—or in other words, living
people—the result is eyeless, skinless, bloody creatures with long claws and exposed brains. When they feed on fresh DNA they immediately mutate to become “stronger, faster hunter[s]” (Resident Evil) as part of an evolutionary arms race. As such, viewers are meant to be horrified by Umbrella’s objectification of and experimentation on Alice, other human victims who are mutated against their will, and non-human animals. In turn, the cruel experimentation and objectification in the films opens a critical space in which the viewer is encouraged to consider the ways that ontologically identifying a figure of the human, in this case, Umbrella executives, legitimates abhorrent exclusion and exploitation of other beings.

In the third film, Extinction, this objectification and exploitation of living beings through experimentation for the sake of knowledge or ‘human’ gain is emphasized again in an early scene that is one of the most disturbing in the series. This scene opens by tracking the progress of Alice inexplicably through recycled events from the first film: waking up in the shower of the mansion in Resident Evil 1, finding herself in a glass hallway equipped with deadly lasers from the Hive, and finally, making her way fearfully into the Raccoon City Hospital, where she narrowly avoids being sliced in two by a blade that springs from the floor only to die painfully due to an automated weapon that shoots her repeatedly in the abdomen. It is only when Umbrella scientists move into frame above her twitching body and then dump her body into an open air ditch in the Nevada desert that the horror of the situation becomes clear: as the camera zooms out from her body to a crane shot, the viewer is assaulted by the sight of hundreds of identical, mangled, open-eyed, and bloody Alices left to decay in the blistering sun. It is revealed that Dr. Issacs has cloned Alice dozens of times, dressed the clones in identical outfits, and put them through traumatic life and death trials recalling experiments on rats in a maze to test their abilities. He is convinced that Project
Alice’s blood is the key to domesticating the zombies, and when the clones inevitably fail and die horribly, a sample of their blood is taken and they are discarded in a mass grave. Like lab animals, these clones are not named but numbered (Issacs kills a total of 87), and therefore their status as objects and the un-ethically secured and abused property of the corporation—like the rabbits and dogs before them—is unmistakably clear. Again, this serves as an instance of the brutal dehumanization, sexism, and speciesism that occurs in the service of an exclusionary, anthropocentric, fantasy human figure.

For Umbrella, everyone and everything outside the minuscule circle of white, male executives are conceptualized only in terms of property: everything from Alice’s wedding ring to the bullets in her gun to the satellites in space bears the property mark and emblem of the Umbrella Corporation. Employees of Umbrella, civilians, and non-human animals alike are treated in the same manner, since they are a part of what Braidotti refers to as the “opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism (“Post Anthropocentrism” 60). The corporate language of Cain, Issacs and Wesker throughout the series make clear their commodification of life: for instance, from the moment Alice is employed by Umbrella (she is the Hive’s head of security in Resident Evil 1) and especially after she is forcibly infected with the T-Virus in Apocalypse, she is conceptualized as Umbrella’s property and called “Project Alice” while Matt (Eric Mabius) becomes the “Nemesis Project.” At the end of Resident Evil 1, Alice and Matt, an environmentalist, escape the Hive only to be immediately detained by Umbrella personnel in biohazard suits. Matt has been clawed by a Licker and, in a great deal of distress, begins mutating. Rather than give him the cure, Umbrella scientists place him in the “Nemesis Program,” allowing the Licker mutation to run wild and making Matt part cybernetic in the process. Alice and
Matt/Nemesis are considered neither subjects nor equals to Umbrella scientists and executives, but, like the non-humans used in Umbrella’s research, bioweapons. As projects they are collaborative enterprises that involve research and experimentation, and are nothing more than property to Umbrella. Alice, Matt/Nemesis, the zombies, and all other bi-products of the T-Virus (such as the Lickers and zombie Dobermans) are constantly referred to as bioweapons rather than victims, so that their existence—or former existence, in the case of zombies—as complex beings with thoughts, emotions, and autonomy is stripped away. Of course, as I have discussed, this is the day to day experience of non-human animals in labs around the world, and it is crucial to note at this juncture that the question of the human is also the question of the animal. As Wolfe has noted, academic debates about (hetero) sexism, racism, classism, and so on are locked in the unexamined framework of speciesism (*Animal Rites* 1), upon which the basic divisive lines between the human and the non-human other are built. As Carol Adams asserts in *The Feminist Care Tradition*, one of the ways to make people appear less human is “to view them as animals” (26) which is, in itself, problematic in that it denies moral consideration to non-human animals in relation to the ‘human’ subject. In Braidotti’s words, “insofar as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as ‘others’. These are the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies” (Braidotti “Post-Humanism” 15).

For Cain, Issacs and Wesker, everything around them is viewed as potentially disposable commodity. In *Apocalypse*, for instance, Major Cain has full control over the quarantine of Raccoon City and the experiments performed on both Alice and Matt, the only two survivors from the Hive in *Resident Evil 1*. Cain is obsessed by scientific research and
further innovation, even as Raccoon City and its residents succumb to the T-Virus. For Cain, the zombification of the city is unplanned, but it creates a convenient gladiator arena/test environment in which the newly enhanced Alice and Matt—the newly mutated and re-named Nemesis—can be pitted against one another. Best notes that humans rely upon hierarchal thinking and clouded analyses of their nature based on “God-complexes, narcissism, logical fallacies, philosophical illusions, and scientific dogmas,” as well as ideologies like “speciesism, carnivorism, patriarchy, rationalism, Social Darwinism, and Eurocentrism”.

Cain’s demand that Alice and Matt fight to the death in order to determine which strand of research is superior reveals his investment in these ideologies and hierarchal beliefs. “A pragmatist and an evolutionist, Cain calls Alice, who has somehow bonded with the virus on a cellular level, evolution rather than mutation, while Matt/Nemesis is merely a “dead end.” A businessman first, Cain only cares about those he considers assets to the company, and only as long as they are still assets. For instance, Dr. Ashford (Jared Harris) is the creator of the T-Virus and as such, a valuable asset to Umbrella. Although Cain goes through great pains to evacuate Ashford from the city, he eventually shoots Dr. Ashford to impress upon Alice that unless she obeys orders, he will kill her friends, who are of no value by comparison.

Non-human animals, ethnic minorities, and women all serve as others and/or objects to Cain, Issacs, and Wesker, but because viewers are oriented to Alice’s point of

---

93 Ironically, the viewer discovers in *Apocalypse* that the T-Virus was invented to cure Ashford’s daughter Angela of a hereditary degenerative disease that would eventually leave her wheelchair bound; when countered with the antivirus, the regenerative properties of the T-Virus allowed Angela to walk and kept the virus in check. Umbrella stole Dr. Ashford’s virus to conduct biological experiments and develop bioweaponry.

94 Dr. Ashford meets the criteria of the classical human in that he is a Caucasian, male intellectual, but he foregoes his privilege because he values his daughter’s life more than Umbrella’s agenda. This is not unlike Matt (Eric Mabius), who breaches the Hive in *Resident Evil* in the hopes of exposing Umbrella’s illegal activity, and getting his sister out in the process. Both men are problematically feminized by their passivity and nurturing tendencies, which ostensibly positions them as feminine and thus non-human others to Umbrella and Cain in particular.
view in the films, they are encouraged to identify with her experience of objectification, horror, and violation over the course of the film series. In turn, viewers are invited to recognize Umbrella’s figurehead scientists and executives as excessive caricatures of the figure of the human that is familiar from the Enlightenment. The films significantly position ethnic minority survivors and female survivors—Alice in particular—in opposition to Umbrella, and I read them as a challenge to the caricature of the Anglo-European male as ostensibly human as they attempt to assert their own subjectivity in the wake of the devastation and atrocities committed by Umbrella.

**Race, and Resistance to Umbrella’s Anthropocentrism and Speciesism**

To be sure, *Resident Evil* is not without problems in its depiction of race: the series features a host of racial minorities who are represented in many cases as essentialized caricatures or comic relief. It also makes clear the anthropocentric hierarchy that is imposed in order to animalize minorities in the film, and yet the films ultimately present racial diversity as resistance to Umbrella’s Western humanist and colonialist ideology. Stephen Harper claims the films have racist, sexist, and homophobic elements (2); from *Apocalypse* he uses Peyton, Jill’s African-American partner on the S.T.A.R.S team,95 and L.J. (Mike Epps) as examples of the films’ inherent racial stereotyping. Since Peyton is bitten by a zombie early in the film, dies, rises, and must finally be shot by Jill, Harper speculates that his death echoes the “narrative convention that racial minorities die first in action horror films” (8) as a symptom of his being other than white. L.J., he argues, is inherently and excessively violent because visible minorities are “‘always already violent’ owing to their supposedly ‘savage’ ancestry” (Tung qtd, in Harper 7). Harper notes L.J.’s (and the film’s)

---

95 Special Tactics and Rescue Services, a specialized division of the Raccoon City police department.
awareness of both social injustice and the representation of black men as subservient to Caucasian men, and claims that such awareness does not compensate for the marginal position of visible minorities in the films. He is partially right, in that they are positioned in large part as disposable; on the lower rungs of an anthropocentric hierarchy.

In the context of hierarchy, it is useful to draw on Stephen Thierman’s discussion of power and hierarchy in a slaughterhouse. Referring to the division of labor in the slaughterhouse, which he reads as a technology of power that is complicit in both the domination and objectification of human and non-human animal subjects, Thierman argues that a variety of species, spatial, and racial hierarchies create an environment in which care and concern for non-human animals is virtually impossible; the hierarchies created by the division of labor in a slaughterhouse reinforces racial hierarchies between the white supervisors in the office and the Mexican and African-American workers on the killing floor who do the manual labor (106). I would suggest here that the same power imbalance that segregates species and race in an anthropocentric framework is visible in the ranks of the Umbrella Corporation, where the white CEO and scientists ostensibly have a higher value than the ethnic minorities who do the company’s manual labor. As a case in point, Carlos Oliveira (Oded Fehr), Nicholai Ginovaef (Zack Ward), and Yuri Logonova (Stefen Hayes), members of the Umbrella Biohazard Countermeasure Force in *Apocalypse*, are trapped in Raccoon City when they ignore orders to let a civilian woman be eaten by zombies. When an Umbrella helicopter then ignores their rescue calls, Oliveira exclaims, “We’re assets, Nicholai. Expendable assets. And we’ve just been expended.” It is significant that Oliveira is

---

96 L.J. commandeers a corporate plane to the surprise of Major Cain, who demands to know why the chopper has not yet taken off yet and is met by the quip, “because I normally drive a Cadillac.” L.J. demonstrates a tongue in cheek cynicism about being relegated to corporate servant to his social and ethnic ‘superior.’ See Harper, 7.
Latin American and his companions are Russian, since it seems that their disposability is determined in part by the blue collar labour they provide to Umbrella, and their corresponding status as ethnic minorities in America. I suggest that the same power imbalance is at work in the ranks of the Umbrella Corporation, where the white CEO and scientists ostensibly have a higher value than the ethnic minorities like Oliveira and Nicholai who do the company’s manual labor. As such, they are placed on the lower rungs of a hierarchy in which their importance and value as individuals is effaced, much as the importance and value of Umbrella’s test subjects, both human and non-human, are first effaced below them. This is an important point to return to, since the non-human animals, like the Dobermans and the rabbit that I mentioned earlier, are also part of this hierarchy; in fact, as Thierman argues of pigs in the slaughterhouse, these non-human animals are “commoditized bodies” that form the base of an anthropocentric pyramid and upon which the system remains standing (104). Resident Evil draws attention to how the objectification of non-human animals extends further to encompass Umbrella’s racial, ethnic, and gendered “others.”

In Afterlife, while running the only remaining Umbrella Headquarters underground in Tokyo, a short scene involving Chairman Wesker demonstrates the violence, power, and anthropocentric hierarchy that enables him to privilege his own life over the lives of the Japanese men who work for his corporation. As Alice invades the top floors of the facility, Wesker—the only white man in a room full of Japanese subordinates—tells his Japanese head of security to seal the gates at ground level. When the man protests that their men are still up there, Wesker shoots him in the head without turning, changing expression, or bothering to look the man in the eye. Clearly, ethnic minorities are expendable based on what
Wesker perceives to be the lesser value of their lives as compared to his, as Wesker seems annoyed that the head of security has the audacity to assume that the Japanese employees trapped above ground have lives worth saving. This point is stressed in the filming of the scene: as Wesker speaks to his head of security, they do not appear in the same shot, a techniques that suggests the Japanese man literally is unable to occupy the same space as an equal. It is only when Wesker shoots him that both men are in frame, and as Wesker pulls the trigger, the shot subtly shifts so that Wesker is centre screen and again, unchallenged. As Thierman discusses in terms of the slaughterhouse, there is a similar downgrading of “particular bodies” from “somatic to corporeal” (Acampora qtd. in Thierman 106). That is, somatic bodies are “live in their phenomenal richness and unique singularity” while corporeal bodies are “brute materiality” (107); things to be used by “people.” From this perspective, the viewer is invited to question the justification of Wesker’s treatment of the Japanese man—and the treatment of non-human animals and other ethnic minorities in the films—as corporeal bodies; as “expendable assets” or things, particularly in relation to white men. The hierarchy here is built upon a false assumption that Wesker, Issacs, and Cain represent a definitive human subject, and that they are somatic while all other beings are not.97

97 The notion of the self-entitled Caucasian man who endangers all others for the sake of his own survival is persistent in zombie film and television: for instance, in Dead Set (2008), a UK based mini-series, television producer Patrick is pretentious and rude to fellow survivors, not to mention directly responsible for all of their deaths when he opens the gate of their sanctuary against the will of the group. Similarly, in the remake of Dawn of the Dead (2004), Steve is the white and privileged yacht owner who is also out for his own pleasure and survival. In Night of the Living Dead (1968), Harry Cooper also attempts to establish himself as leader and patriarch of all the survivors in the farmhouse, presumably because he is both white and a family man. It seems, then, that the fantasy of the human as male, white, heterosexual, etcetera, embodies the qualities that cause total destruction of all survivors in zombie films.
On the heels of this invitation to think through the dangers of positioning the human figure at the head of an illusory hierarchy—illusory because the human animal is an animal that has no inherent value that outranks non-human animals—I argue that the films caricature the Umbrella corporation and the self-ascribed “humans” at its helm only to demonstrate how flawed such a human figure is, and how ontologically permeable. After all, Wesker himself is the ultimate caricature of a human figure: everything about his appearance and demeanor suggests a performance of hypermasculine authority, from his slick, bleached-blond hair to the black sunglasses he almost never removes. Characterized also by his alabaster-white skin, his black clothes, and his over-articulated way of speaking in a deeper register that often sounds contrived, he is the epitome of a hyperbolized white, male patriarchal figure that is deceptive and abhorrent in every way. In other words, Wesker is loathsome in that he embodies and exacerbates the arrogance and entitlement of the fantasy figure of the human that is taken to the extreme. In him, it becomes clear that the characteristics that supposedly mark him as the pan-ultimate human figure of Umbrella are superficial and artificial. As such, Wesker’s anthropocentric claim on subjectivity is rejected by the film’s protagonists as the films position racial minorities as individuals, the owners of what Thierman might call somatic bodies, in their own right. It follows then that the negative racial representations I have been discussing are themselves subsumed by more progressive representations, which undermine an investment in the ostensibly white, male, human figure and the hierarchy it oversees in an anthropocentric framework. Indeed, the representation of ethnic minorities in the film opens a critical space in which to evaluate and critique the norm that only white men can be considered fully human, particularly since Alice, as well as the other survivors of the films, have been persecuted by said men. As will become clear via discussion of Alice’s own...
mutation and the mutation of Wesker and Issacs in the next section, the notion of “fully human” again proves contentious since ultimately, ontologically determining the human, animal, and zombie is not possible. If ontology is endlessly mutable rather than a fixed, known quantity, then anthropocentrism begins to crumble as a given. It follows then, that a paradigm shift that carefully considers the importance of the lives of all beings becomes necessary.

The racial representations in Resident Evil draw attention to the brutal effects of anthropocentrism and speciesism as exemplified by Umbrella scientists and executives, and they work to disrupt their hierarchal position next to the human figure of Umbrella. It is no coincidence that in the films from Apocalypse to Retribution, the strong and active survivors occupy several of the subject positions that Umbrella (and anthropocentrism in general) have oppressed: racial minorities and women. As previously mentioned, Alice’s eventual allies in Apocalypse include not just Oliveira, Nicolai, and L.J., but also Terri Morales, a Chinese news reporter. From Extinction onwards, the trend of ethnically diverse characters persists, even if they have a low survivability rate over the course of the franchise. I am not suggesting that ethnically diverse characters are present in the films only to serve as zombie fodder, but rather, that these characters unsettle the assumed superiority of the white, male, corporate Umbrella antagonists that Alice struggles against. Many white characters also die in the series, and Oliveira and L.J. remain allies in the third installment. In Afterlife, the African-American former basketball player Luther West (Boris Kodjoe), Asian intern Kim Yong (Norman Yeung), and Hispanic Angel Ortiz (Sergio Peris-Mencheta) become part of Alice’s cohort, and in Retribution, former Umbrella operative Ada Wong (Sally Cahill) joins Alice. Oliveira in particular is neither a comic nor satirical representation of an ethnic
minority: he is a man who strives to save his friend Yuri and Angela Ashford (*Apocalypse*), and who sacrifices his life by driving through the zombie infested gates of Umbrella’s Nevada compound armed with dynamite to ensure that Alice and other survivors can steal the chopper waiting there (*Extinction*). Rather than read Oliveira’s sacrifice as necessary for the survival of the white characters of the film, it seems more fitting to note that as an ethnic minority, he is neither caricature nor comic relief. Markedly, in *Extinction* Oliveira is introduced as second in command of a convoy headed by a young woman, which disrupts the expected narrative convention that only males can occupy positions of leadership. Against Umbrella’s Eurocentric and exclusionary constituency, these characters can be read by contrast as a progressive patchwork of diversity in which friendship, life, and community are valued. There are problems here in that attributing such positive qualities to the survivors in *Resident Evil* runs the risk of simply re-locating the figure of the human in females and/or ethnic minorities, and on the whole the series’ depiction of race and gender are sometimes contradictory. Nevertheless, I maintain that for all its confusion, the emphasis on diverse ethnic and gendered survivors nevertheless sharpens and simultaneously undermines the caricature of Umbrella’s ‘human’ as morally and ethically bankrupt; a figure bent on destruction and consumption and thus falling out of favor. In effect, the films attempt to destabilize the assumptions about the figure of the human that sits on the top rung of an illusory species and ontological hierarchy.

“They did something to me. I barely feel human anymore”: Alice in *Posthuman Wonderland*

In developing the T-Virus, the Umbrella Corporation unwittingly facilitates the unseating of the human figure that is imagined as able bodied, heterosexual, white, and male,
as the virus causes often uncontrolled mutation and therefore constant transformation. In other words, Umbrella’s biotechnological endeavors “have called into question the immutability of boundaries between humans, animals and machines, artificial and natural, ‘born’ and ‘made’” (Graham 1-2), especially for Alice, who is irrevocably changed by the T-Virus and by Dr. Issacs, who implants her with a technological program in an attempt to control her. Such technologies have allowed for the splicing of the organic and inorganic alike, and as Braidotti points out, “the concept of the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns” (The Posthuman “Introduction” 1). Alice’s subversive potential is stressed via her mutability. Wolfe claims that “posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore” (“What is Posthumanism?” xv), and Alice is the embodiment of a technologically and biologically transgressive figure in that she merges and supersedes both technology and many of her own biological and physical limitations. She is the only person to ever successfully bond with the T-Virus on a cellular level and reap all of its beneficial qualities, which include superhuman strength, speed, agility, and telepathy. This is significant when one considers that by contrast, both Dr. Issacs and Wesker attempt to harness the potential of the T-Virus and not only fail, but also become hybrid monsters in the process. When bitten by a genetically enhanced zombie in Extinction, Issacs injects himself with massive doses of the antivirus and becomes a mutated monster: his torso becomes impossibly muscular, his right arm extends into a claw-like appendage that can extend like roots or tentacles to ensnare his victims, and his visage is half lost in the bulbous mutations on his face and head. This is ironic given his investment in objective science and maintaining
his own position as above and outside of the experiments he has run using Alice and the
zombies themselves. Moreover, Issacs’ transformation demonstrates that despite his position
as a scientist and a self-proclaimed human, there is no ontological line in the film that cannot
be crossed. As Graham points out, even though monsters have been used to mark fault-lines
between humans and almost-humans, they also have a “capacity to show us the ‘leakiness’ of
bodily boundaries…[they] are ‘monstrous’ not so much in the horror they evoke but in their
exposure of the redundancy and instability of the ontological hygiene of the humanist
subject” (12). The monster Issacs has become makes a mockery of his self-perception as
untouchably and irrevocably ‘human.’ In the scene of their final battle, Issacs tells Alice that
he is “the way of the future” as he prepares to deliver a deathblow. Undeterred, Alice laughs
at his attempt to establish superiority and exclaims that he is “just another asshole,” implying
that he is neither exceptional nor superior in that his very existence now undermines the
humanist ideology to which he subscribes. Chairman Wesker too loses control of the T-Virus
within him, which prompts him to gather human survivors aboard the false rescue ship called
Arcadia in *Afterlife* in order to eat them in the hopes that their DNA will keep his mutation in
check. In his final showdown with Alice in that film, it is revealed that like Alice, Wesker
has super-human speed. Unlike Alice, he has mutated to have a mouthful of flowering
tentacles that indicate his hybridity. Despite being shot in the head during his confrontation
with Alice in *Afterlife*, Wesker comes back to life. This is significant since like the Majini
zombies, he becomes a patchwork of genetic and ontological being that is simultaneously
living and dead, non-human animal and human animal, and which is constantly mutating;
what Braidotti would undoubtedly would call an embodiment of impersonal and posthuman
life. There is, in other words, no figure that can be called ‘human’ in the films if matter cannot have ontology.

Despite the countless times from *Resident Evil* to *Retribution* that Umbrella and its leaders attempt to subdue Alice, her resistance and mutation reveal the impotence of her hybrid adversaries. The viewer is primed to see her as a sympathetic figure, but also to see her much as Cain does in *Apocalypse*: as evolution. In *Apocalypse*, she dispatches dozens of Umbrella’s security guards using their batons and her own body as a weapon; her movements are visually-enhanced by the camera and are thus so fast they can barely be seen by the human eye. In *Extinction*, set four years after the events of *Apocalypse*, Alice has also become telekinetic. Despite her abilities, however, the mutations caused by the T-Virus make Alice realize that she “barely feel[s] human anymore,” and that she considers herself to be “a freak.” She over-invests in the idea of being human, which not only is a fantasy subject position, but one which ideologically excludes and belittles her next to Umbrella and its figureheads. Her new state of being as a genetically altered subject who is in part technologized by Umbrella betrays the slippage between supposedly static ontological positions. Her abilities, mutations and technologized alterations allow her to challenge Umbrella’s limited concept of the human, but ironically, she has never fully determined who or what she is, even before she is infected by the T-Virus. She is introduced in the first film as a sort of newborn, waking naked in the wet womb of the shower with no memory of who she is or what she is capable of. This motif continues strongly in *Resident Evil 1* as Alice finds herself appraising her reflection with no recognition in the steam-clouded mirror of her bathroom, and later in a fragmented reflection that signals her self-fragmentation when she is inside the Hive. In subsequent films, after being infected by the T-Virus and then
technologically altered by Issacs at the end of *Apocalypse* so that she can, for a time, be shut down like a computer, Alice is occupied by the question of *what* she is: this is a question she is never quite able to answer.

It is clear that Alice’s more than human abilities allow her to challenge Umbrella’s attempts to make her a commodity. Alice’s gaze, bolstered by her mutated abilities, poses a threat to Umbrella’s figure of the human: the surveillance cameras in *Resident Evil’s* Hive facility are the eyes of its AI supercomputer, the Red Queen. In the Raccoon City hospital and in the streets, Umbrella cameras track the living and the dead and their satellites allow for clear pictures and identification, so that there is nowhere its eye cannot see or invade. However, Alice’s vision is a powerful motif in all of the films, which start with an extreme close up of Alice’s right eye opening widely; it is always her perspective that orients the films. What happens when she looks back at Umbrella is a refusal of subjugation and objectification. Turning to psychoanalytical theory for a moment, Linda Williams argues that when a woman chooses to look at the monster instead of looking away, there is a potentially subversive threat in her recognition of the power and potency of a non-phallic sexuality (‘When the Woman Looks’ 24), and each time Alice opens a single blue eye in extreme close-up, she challenges Umbrella’s attempts to objectify her and rank her in an anthropocentric framework that in turn positions the company’s white men as ‘human.’ While often women are punished for looking in the horror film, Alice’s gaze becomes an unsubdued threat; a force to be reckoned with. As such, her evolutionary trajectory over the course of the series enables her to disrupt the notion that she is less human because she is

---

98 This is a common motif in the slasher film, in which women who ‘see’ horror are frozen in terror; they are punished for their sexual boldness and for not being virtuous ‘good girls’, their bodies punctured and penetrated usually by male psychosexual aggressors who symbolically attempt to castrate them. See Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, and Williams, “When the Woman Looks” for an extension of this argument.
female. In fact, her ongoing mutation and evolution suggest that there is no definitive
ontology that would allow Umbrella to place her on a hierarchy of being based on gender,
species, or race.

Alice’s gaze—transformed and given weight by the mutations and evolution taking
place in her body—is indicative of posthumanism in the sense that it prevents and refutes the
ontological determination that sets the groundwork for the anthropocentric fantasy figure of
the human as represented by Umbrella figureheads. Rather than remain a safely controlled
and reifiable figure, a female who is, in an anthropocentric framework, inferior to the men
who run Umbrella, Alice evolves and thus reveals that any definition of ontology is arbitrary.
In the final scene of *Apocalypse*, for instance, Alice’s body is recovered and revived by Dr.
Issacs after she attempts escape from Raccoon City. Floating naked in a fetal position in a
synthetic, fluid-filled womb, she seems to be a ‘child’ or creation of Umbrella more than
ever, especially since when she wakes, she has no idea who she is, how to talk, or how to
even use a pen. This moment first seems to suggest her continued submission and
vulnerability; however, with her powers growing at an exponential rate, she is a threat to
Umbrella’s gaze and the patriarchal hierarchy that sees her as a mere commodity. When she
literally attacks a young male scientist with a pen, stopping with control a millimeter from his
pupil she signifies not only that she is capable of punishing Umbrella for its assaultive gaze,
but also of stepping outside her place on an anthropocentric hierarchy.

---

99 For Julia Kristeva, women are related to the natural world and “polluting objects that fall into two categories: excremental and menstrual” (“Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection” 10) as opposed to the paternal symbolic subject which is “constituted as ‘whole and proper’” (13). Umbrella’s attempt to re-create Alice demonstrates scientific and paternalistic mastery over biology (and women), and it fails. Barbara Creed’s analysis of *Alien* in “Horror and the Archaic Mother: *Alien*” 16-30 also draws attention to the sterile white sleep pods in the ship *Nostromo*, called Mother, that gives a sanitary ‘birth’ to its crew as opposed to the visceral births of the aliens.
In the final scene of *Apocalypse*, Alice uses her newly enhanced abilities to undermine Umbrella’s constant surveillance and the framework that defines her as an object for visual consumption by males. As she leaves the facility and is seen by a security guard on the monitors, Alice is alone, wet, and clad only in a towel, which suggests her inherent vulnerability. Further, the guard is represented as being safely in a control room and in the powerful position of voyeur as he gazes, ostensibly invisible, at her. The moment appears to follow the expected conventions of female representation in Hollywood: as de Lauretis claims, “the representation of woman as spectacle—body to be looked at, place of sexuality, and object of desire—so pervasive in our culture, finds in narrative cinema its most complex expression and widest circulation” (4). Nevertheless, Alice resists being reduced to an object for visual consumption by manipulating the conventions that would make her so: telekinetically, she ensures that her image fills every screen and camera lens; the camera zooms in on her face and bare shoulders from above, an angle that first appears to reinforce her vulnerability since she is literally under the gaze of the guard. However, her gaze penetrates through the camera lens and confirms that the guard is neither invisible nor safe; she holds his gaze in defiance and is well aware that she is being watched. In fact, Alice appears to invite him to watch even as she makes him pay for doing so: as she gazes up from beneath her lashes, smiling coyly and momentarily playing with her hair in a gesture that is somewhat flirtatious, she causes the guard to bleed to death from his eyes, nose and ears. Indeed, it appears that the guard cannot look away, confirming, as Harper notes, that Alice’s pose here invites a comparison with fashion photography, endowing her with “drop dead gorgeous” beauty that reverses the “objectifying gaze with which Jovovich is associated as an L’Oreal model” (6). Alice’s pose, I would suggest, does even more: it upsets the
underlying terms of female objectification that are often taken for granted in narrative film and prompts the viewer to question those assumptions. In de Lauretis’ terms, one might say the pose is part of a larger, transgressive *Alice in Wonderland* story that questions such objectification. As she argues in the context of critical feminism, one has to be willing to “begin an argument”, to “formulate questions that will redefine the context, displace the terms of the metaphors, and make up new ones” (3). Alice’s gaze increasingly becomes a weapon as the series progresses; it is the vehicle for the telekinetic power that she uses to direct a flamethrower into a sky full of zombified crows in *Extinction*, and again when with one look and widening of the pupils, she hurls a psychic blast that barrels Issacs through a wall in the same film. As a figure that defies ontological stability by constantly and quickly mutating, Alice is the primary posthuman threat to Umbrella. This company, founded on anthropocentric ideology in its pursuit of profit at the expense of all living beings outside its own small circle of ‘humans’, is threatened by Alice’s very existence, as well as the existence of the zombies and other mutated, evolving beings that the company is responsible for creating since the T-virus mutations serve to undermine rigid definitions of being.

On the whole, Alice signifies a figure that is in a constant state of becoming, of ontological indeterminacy, and thus of the posthuman that is yet to come because she is a figure of ongoing ontological evolution. Moreover, similar to the zombies, Alice has undergone a sort of resurrection that complicates the idea of a life/death separation. When Issacs finds her body at the end of *Apocalypse*, partially charred and thrown clear of the wreckage of the crashed chopper she attempted to escape Raccoon City in, Alice is clearly dead. Nevertheless, the next time the viewer sees her she is alive and regenerated in a fluid filled chamber. Like Wesker and the zombies, she too demonstrates that life and death form a
continuum rather than diametrically opposed states of being, which in turn recalls Braidotti’s concept of Life as impersonal, monstrously other, and of matter as ontologically free regardless of being dead, alive, or in-animate. Not only do Alice, Wesker, Issacs, and the zombies too signal the impossibility of maintaining a figure of the human that is definitive when matter is ontologically free, but it is clear that in attempting to maintain one, Umbrella capitulated to speciesism, racism, and sexism as part of an ideology that Resident Evil suggests cannot sustain itself during an apocalypse when what it means to be human, animal, zombie, living, dead, and so on serve more as a series of relationalities without lines of demarcation than they do as strict categories with distinct ontologies.

“My Name is Alice, and this is my World”: Last Stand on a Charnel Ground

The final scene of Resident Evil’s final film to date, Retribution, is a useful image in discussing the fantasy figure of the human when, in the context of a charnel ground, the suffering of the planet and all other beings due to anthropocentrism cannot be avoided or ignored. In this scene, the viewer is reminded that at the end of the series, the planet has become a barren, inhospitable wasteland; a literal charnel ground upon which the decaying remains of the human species and its civilization are disturbed only by the flesh-eating monsters, mutations, and zombies that roam freely. Alice is escorted to the Oval Office of the White House, where she discovers that it is now the final fortress against the undead and the mutated creatures created by the T-Virus. It is headed by Wesker, and defended by the remaining U.S. Marine Corps, S.T.A.R.S. operatives, and Alice’s small band of survivors. Wesker tells Alice that it is the site of humanity’s last stand against T-Virus abominations. As he leads Alice and her fellow survivors—Ada, Leon (one of the men sent to assist Alice
in *Retribution*, and Jill—to survey the battleground from the roof, the camera zooms out to reveal Washington, D.C. as a nightmare vision that appears hopeless. It is impossible to tell if it is night or day because the polluted red sky is filled with clouds of black smoke as far as the eye can see as the city burns. The perimeter of the White House is patrolled by tanks and army personnel, while beyond them, a single high wall armed with fire guns is all that stands between the remaining human survivors and the horde of undead at the gates. Above them, helicopters and mutated flying monsters compete in the skies. It does not, by and large, seem to indicate a hopeful future, and at first glance, it evokes a number of problems in terms of moving beyond the fantasy figure of the human. Problematically, for instance, Wesker’s claim that they are humanity’s last stand asserts a persistence of the human umbrella, but one that is now simply spread wide enough—and perhaps temporarily—to cover women (Alice, Jill, and Ada), men (Leon) and ethnic minorities (Ada, who is Chinese) while still identifying an other—the Red Queen—to villainize. In this final scene, Wesker tells Alice that the Red Queen has been reactivated and is determined to exterminate humanity, and so he re-infects Alice with the T-Virus in order to make her “the ultimate weapon.” Wesker helps Alice because he realizes there is an enemy capable of destroying him. His presence here is somewhat ambiguous: as former head of the most corrupt company of the world and would be pan-ultimate ‘human’ despite his own mutation, Wesker is now positioned as the new president of the United States, implying a reinstating of anthropocentric values in the U.S., whereby anything and anyone outside the ‘White’ House and parameters for the fantasy figure of the human is othered and perceived as a threat. In some ways then, the rhetoric here is very much about American defenses postured against terrorist forces, even if said force is a creation of Umbrella itself.
It should be noted that Alice’s position as film protagonist, for all its subversive potential, also makes clear that there is never a way to completely move beyond the fantasy human figure as such, and so there is always a tension at work in demonstrating its limits.

For example, despite her powers, strengths and abilities, Alice is referred to here not a person, but as a “weapon” to be wielded; this is a role she has been trying to resist over the course of the series and Wesker’s attempt at this point to reduce her to a commodity suggests that he has learned very little, despite the fact that he and his company have destroyed the world by making a business of the commodification of other life forms. At the end of the world, he still insists on forcibly injecting Alice against her will. Insidiously, normative humanist ideologies begin to re-assert themselves: drawing on Neil Badminton’s work, Braidotti warns that “‘Apocalyptic accounts of the end of ‘man’ [...] ignore Humanism’s capacity for regeneration and, quite literally, recapitulation’ (2003: 11). The Vitruvian Man rises over and over again from his ashes, continues to uphold universal standards and to exercise a fatal attraction” (“Posthumanism” 29). That is to say, even in this scene, at the end of the world, there is no ‘end’ of the human. Even if we do not focus on Wesker here, Alice herself poses another problem: even if she is more than a weapon and is in fact an embodiment of mutation, blurred ontology, and a posthuman work in progress, as she stands beautiful and center screen in this last scene it is possible that the film only manages to replace the Vitruvian Man with a Vitruvian Woman.100 That said, it is also true that if the

---

100 Certainly, Harper and Wilson both call attention to the fact that Alice’s whiteness seems to afford her a certain amount of class, privilege, and social standing, particularly when compared to characters like Rain, who is non-white. For Wilson, Alice’s fighting style and sexual experiences suggest elitism, luxury, and intellectualism: she has a choreographed, martial arts fighting style and rolls around with her lover in Resident Evil “in white sheets on a magnificent and luxurious four-poster bed” (Wilson 32).
figure of the human persists, it is not un-problematically transparent or sustainable if one accepts that matter is ontologically free.

It is hard to tell at this juncture whether Resident Evil 6 will re-endorse the figure of the human and the dominance of Homo sapiens on the planet, but I doubt it fully can. By introducing the numerous mutations of humans, zombies, and animals by way of bioengineering, the films allow a critique of the human figure to be made despite the fact that this figure is persistent. A world in which a virus sweeps the planet, unseats the human as dominant species via zombie apocalypse, and in which that virus is capable of challenging all claims to ontological authority because it changes what it means to be human, zombie, or animal, cannot help but ultimately reject the humanism of the Enlightenment. While a charnel house is described as “a place under or near churches, where the bones of the dead are re-posited” (“Charnel-House, n.” Webster 138), a charnel ground is a term which, according to Morton, is coined by Tibetan Buddhists and refers to an above-ground site where the corpses of the dead are cleaved and scattered, left to putrefaction in the open air and to the appetites of vultures (“Thinking the Charnel Ground” 88). Evoking an image of such a place where human remains are left en masse, unburied, and exposed to the air and to predators on a planetary scale defies the idea that human species survival is always already guaranteed. The end of Retribution suggests that despite the anthropocentric notion that the human species will always prevail, the last survivors may also perish, leaving nothing behind in the wake of human extinction but the zombies, mutations, and eventually just the bacteria. Such an interpretation may appear overly nihilistic, but it has the effect of disturbing the reassuring notion that the anthropocentric subject will go on as it always has no matter what comes. In a filmic context in which zombie narratives are troubling default assumptions
about anthropocentrism and the human, this disruption is arguably a good thing. When Darwin wrote about natural selection and extinction in his seminal text, *The Origin of Species*, he contended that in the struggle for life and the evolutionary profitable variations in species and individuals that arose in response to it, “less improved forms of life” almost inevitably became extinct (“Introduction” 3). From an evolutionary perspective, then, the zombie apocalypse signals the extinction of the human animal insofar as the human animal reaches an evolutionary limit for growth and development. It follows that recognizing the possibility of human extinction may have a humbling effect: it reminds us that like all other beings, we have “infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to external nature” (“Struggle for Existence” 40) and are not separate from them. As Darwin put it, the only cause to marvel at extinction lies in “our presumption in imagining for a moment that we understand the many complex contingencies on which the existence of each species depends” (“On the Geological Succession” 202); humans are not hierarchically superior to other beings in terms of intelligence, understanding, or other arbitrary assignments of value. While it would be easy to read the final scene in *Retribution* in particular as a warning about the horror of a posthuman future wherein all ontological lines are crossed and becomings are constant rather than fixed, I contend that such an apocalypse has positive potential: if, as Darwin argued, natural selection is a process by which variations in any being that are profitable to it help to secure its survival and potentially the survival of its offspring by inheritance (3), then figures like Alice and the zombies embody necessary adaptation in a hostile world.\textsuperscript{101} Moreover, I ultimately contend that this final scene in the film invites a

\textsuperscript{101} Of course, zombie “procreation” is accomplished by viral transmission rather than birth, yet their affliction and mutations appear to be passed on in a similar way. In *Resident Evil* in particular, I should point out that since the human-made T-Virus is responsible for the reanimation of the dead and for mutation, it might appear more akin to artificial selection than natural selection. However, as a living organism, the T-Virus quickly
consideration of the posthuman and the apocalypse that resonates powerfully with Morton’s concept of the charnel ground, which invites the viewer to see the image as a necessary place in which to confront the limits of anthropocentrism.

*Resident Evil*, as I have suggested, is preoccupied with telling the story of how the world ends, but it is a story that undermines what Western cultures and societies believe the world to be in anthropocentric terms. In the context of the zombie apocalypse in *Resident Evil*, the “end of the world” means the end of the end of the world ‘as we know it,’ and that is the world of capitalism, patriarchy, anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene: “that is to say an age when the earth’s ecological balance is directly regulated by humanity” (Braidotti 79). If the Anthropocene is indeed coming to an end, then we can no longer afford to blindly position the human as being at the center of the world. In posthuman theories about the end of the world by Morton and Braidotti, there are resonances in *Resident Evil* that stress the impossibility of maintaining a concept of the world with humans at its center. Morton claims that the way humans mediate the world creates a concept of the world that anesthetizes us to the charnel ground, which Tibetan Buddhists compare to “an emergency room of ecological co-existence” that is permeated by blood and screaming (“The End of the World” 126-127). That is, the charnel ground is a space where the suffering around us cannot be denied. In light of this, Morton claims that “[W]orld is a fragile aesthetic effect around whose corners we are beginning to see” and that planetary awareness is not the realization that we are the world, but that we aren’t (99). This argument is counterintuitive to the way in which the world is both mediated and represented in anthropocentric terms; it suggests that the ‘world’ is evolves itself to be able to mutate zombies. Further, the ability of Alice’s body to bond with the T-Virus in a singular way suggests that she is a prime example of natural selection in the race for survival.
something else entirely, and understanding the end of it demands that the human species recognize that it is not central to the world; nor does it or should it hold dominion over the ecology or other life forms. Considering the zombie apocalypse in Resident Evil through the lens of Morton’s ecological posthumanism, then, exposes the human—as an invasive species and a figure—as pretender to the illusion of a planetary throne that does not exist.\(^\text{102}\) This is especially true of Umbrella, whose executives refuse to recognize or remedy the terrible reality—or charnel ground—their capitalist ventures in bioweaponry have created. Not only is the company willing to be the cause of large scale death before the apocalypse for a profit, but it bafflingly continues operations and experimentation even after its surviving employees are quarantined below ground and its prospective buyers are dead; their countries in ruin (Extinction). Indeed, Umbrella is dismissive of, and in most cases the cause of, suffering. For instance, Retribution opens with Umbrella war-planes killing all survivors aboard the ship Arcadia, and closes in Umbrella’s last surviving base, an underwater arena in Russia, that develops clones for the purpose of demonstrating to prospective buyers the effectiveness of the T-virus in killing large populations.

In an un-dead, mutating world, the company’s figureheads cling to their anthropocentric world view even as that system is shown to be pointless and futile. In the opening scene of Extinction, time-lapse photography features the spinning Earth which within months experiences a distinct geological and ecological shift: the drying up of lakes and rivers, the reduction of whole continents to barren wastelands, and the planet on the whole withering and dying as a result of the T-Virus. Certainly, Morton makes the

\[^\text{102}\] There is a striking parallelism here between the Martians in H.G. Wells’ War of the Worlds and humans, both of whom are self-proclaimed superior species with the right to exploit Earth, its life-forms, and resources at will.
connection between the fantasy world of zombie apocalypse and ecological posthumanism clear by characterizing “what exists outside the charmed circle of Nature and life [as] a charnel ground, a place of life and death, of death-in-life and life-in-death, an undead place of zombies, viroids, junk DNA, ghosts, silicates, cyanide, radiation, demonic forces, and pollution” (“The End of the World” 126). This horrible space is described as being too vivid to be called a world, too entrenched in death and suffering. Using a phrase from Žižek, Morton refers to the charnel ground as “‘the desert of the real’” (qtd. in Morton 126) rather than calling it a fantasy nightmare vision, because he contends that we already live in it; to call it a fantasy world would be to ignore the reality of suffering and ecological destruction in the world created by anthropocentrism, much as Umbrella executives do in the representational world of Resident Evil up until Retribution’s final scene. Interestingly, when he describes the charnel ground, Morton could well have been describing the sight of Washington in Retribution, a scene which is indeed saturated by zombies, viroids, junk DNA, radiation, and pollution. Resident Evil’s apocalyptic vision also holds that its characters are already in a place of death and destruction; the “world” has already ended. For instance, the trailer for Retribution—with its emphasis on smiling people that comprise part of a ‘world picture’ from their prospective countries and who have access to ‘world pictures’ of each other via their Sony screens—presents the ‘my world’ concept as an aesthetic concept. In the narrative of the film, the charnel ground of post-apocalyptic Washington—burning, smoking, and overrun by zombies and myriad creatures—smashes what Morton would call the safe aestheticization of the world that allows a distancing from suffering and from intimacy with other beings. Despite its gruesome imagery of death and decay, the charnel ground is an image rich in spiritual significance, and is as much a place of
interconnectivity with other species as it is of destruction. In Tibet, a charnel ground is a place where the dead receive a sky burial: their corpses are chopped and scattered on the open ground in offering to vultures. Morton calls this process “the most ecological death imaginable, one that acknowledges the fact of coexistence” (“Thinking the Charnel Ground” 88). In other words, the Buddhists acknowledge that the human body is a part of, not apart from, the cycle of life and death on the planet. With this in mind, it becomes a place of awareness and awakening, a place where anthropocentrism and the fantasy figure of the human can potentially be challenged in a productive way.

When Alice says “this is my world,” what we can hear is, “this is my charnel ground.” Her claim suggests her recognition that the concept of the world as anthropocentric and ideal is an illusion that conceals the suffering of the ecology and planetary life. Resident Evil’s apocalyptic trajectory triggers shock and anxiety about ecological trauma that is caused directly by humans, which all the remaining characters, even Wesker, are finally forced to address head-on: there are no more bunkers in which to hide. Notably, the final characters in the scene are shown standing gamely, legs squarely placed, and facing the horrific reality ahead as a unified front. Even if temporarily, their differences are superseded by the recognition that something must be done about the reality of their decimated world, and it must be done as a unit that is based on relationalities rather than differences. At the end of Retribution, there can be no denying the suffering of the planet or of the beings on it, and after so much emphasis on the transformations and becomings that result from the T-Virus, and by extension, technological innovations, the film makes it clear that at the end of the world there is no definitive human. For Haraway, defining the human is complicated by an indeterminate ontology: she suggests that “to be human is to be a congeries of relationalities”
(“When We Have Never Been Human” 147); that is, humans cannot be treated as one thing when “[h]umans, wherever you track them, are products of situated relationalities with organisms, tools, much else. We are quite a crowd, at all of our temporalities and materialities” (146). As such, for Haraway we have never been ‘human’ if what we mean is a singular, ahistorical, and unchanging understanding of the word, and in Resident Evil, there is no ‘human’ figure that suggests singularity or stagnancy.

The final scene of Retribution implies that the end product of innovation and ecological disaster is the end of the Anthropocene, and the atrocious speciesism, sexism, and racism that reveals itself as a product of anthropocentrism reiterates that we have never been human at all; the figure of the human may be persistent, but it ultimately falls short in Resident Evil as a series, making way for posthumanism not as an end in itself, but as a means by which the transgression of the normative limits of the human are made possible. Clearly delineating the struggling ineptitudes of the human figure as an historical, cultural and epistemological given, the series to date leaves the viewer in a world of mutability and uncertainty; one in which the zombie figure in particular serves as a backdrop for the end of the world but is also as a post-anthropocentric, posthuman figure in and of itself. That is to say, as I have discussed, the zombie itself is the quintessential posthuman, post-anthropocentric figure, especially as it continues to mutate under the influence of the T-Virus. Braidotti’s concept of the posthuman is instrumental to this logic if Zoe/Life is something that has its own generative vitality that is impersonal and completely other in its alterity, particularly when she argues that all matter—living, dead, in-animate—is ontologically free. The zombie figure is living-dead matter that is paradoxically ambulatory, and in Resident Evil, it mutates to cross boundaries between the human and animal as well. In
the context of changing bodies of all kinds in *Resident Evil* and the undermining of the human figure, the posthuman emerges. Overall then, the films create fissures in the ground beneath anthropocentrism via a virus that undermines human exceptionalism. The end of the world is a result of scientific and genetic endeavors that make it exceedingly impossible to understand humans as distinct from other living things and from the environment in which they live, but it is also heralded by the zombie apocalypse and the posthuman zombie, which in these films destabilizes Romero’s supposed ontology of the zombie itself.
Chapter 5 All the Rage: Broken Speed Limits and Broken Ontological Boundaries in 28 Days Later

“Terror is the realization of the law of movement.” –Hannah Arendt

“Let us take a look: there have always been bad guys. But their fights were due to trafficking or hierarchical codes of honor with graduated levels of violence. Now a glance is enough to cause an attack and people are stabbed for next to nothing, for increasingly futile motives. Getting carried away has taken the place of enthusiasm, and reaction, action. We are in the fit of rage.” –Paul Virilio

Speed has become the defining characteristic of the post-millennial zombie in film, and Danny Boyle’s 28 Days Later (2002) catalyzed the rapid explosion of velocity-centric zombie productions to come, both in terms of the figure itself and a tendency towards jerky, handheld filming and visual fragmentation to emphasize the frenetic, panicked, and hyper-kinetic progression of events. Boyle envisioned the zombie not as a shambling, undead, flesh-eating ghoul, but as a living, breathing being infected with a virus called Rage. His landmark film constructs the zombie as a result of contagion rather than nuclear radiation, forgoes the formulaic requirement that a zombie must be first dead and then resurrected, and nullifies even their need or desire to eat—the infected do not, as some scholars mistakenly assume—eat the flesh of their victims; they tear with their teeth, but do not consume. In most cases, their rage manifests through the violent beating of and tearing at their victims.103

Zombie film productions picked up speed even as the zombies in them followed suit. For instance, House of the Dead (2003) emphasizes the evolution and growing diversity of the zombie figure with its running, swimming zombies. As discussed in Chapter 4, by the time

103Rudiger Heinze and Jochen Petzold argue that zombies in 28 Days Later “still are the mindless, relentlessly driven flesh eaters that they have been ever since George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead in 1968” (“No More Room in Hell” 57). I disagree since the infected of Boyle’s film often bite, but do not consume, their victims, and as I will argue, they are fundamentally different from Romero’s zombies. The infected are alive and are so consumed with Rage that even biological imperatives for survival do not motivate them. By contrast, Romero’s zombies are undead and driven to eat even though they do not require it and cannot process food.
*Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) was released, its zombies underwent a dramatic shift from the zombies in the first film: some of them still shambled, but the majority were rapid, able to climb stairs and in subsequent films, able to run, jump, swim, shoot, and mutate.\footnote{See Chapter 4.} In the same year, Zack Snyder’s remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) replaced the shambling zombies from Romero’s original film with zombies which returned almost instantaneously from the dead and which, despite their decay, attacked victims with frightening velocity. Other examples of prominent films that reimagine zombies as infected and fast include the Spanish film *REC* (2007), which was remade in America in 2008 as *Quarantine*, Yann Demange’s British zombie miniseries *Dead Set* (2008), in which the zombies are frenzied predators with uncanny reaction time, and Ruben Fleischer’s *Zombieland* (2009). To date, the velocity of the zombie reaches top-speed in *World War Z* (2013) as the figures stampede among the living and later storm the fortified walls of Israel in a sort of pyramid, falling on one another and scrambling upwards until they breach the city’s defenses.\footnote{Revisit Chapter 3 for further analysis of this scene in the context of separatism, Zionism, and the Israel/Palestine conflict.}

Despite the proliferation of speed in zombie films and in *28 Days Later* in particular, speed has been curiously under-theorized. On the surface, speed in the film is as a catalyst for violence, infection, terror, and a visceral reaction to threats in *28 Days Later*. The film certainly dramatizes fears of epidemic, pandemic, and terrorism as well as the failed management of sudden crisis and the frightening speed at which things deteriorate, but I want to posit a new way of looking at speed in the film and to explore what acceleration and deceleration might mean in the context of anthropocentrism. Some scholars, like Jordan Carroll, read *28 Days Later* in the context of failures of risk management in finance,
medicine, and national security. He claims that given the speed of infection and lack of preparedness, there is an inability in *28 Days Later* to perceive risk, let alone defend against it (“The Aesthetics of Risk” 49). For him, what makes *28 Days Later* so frightening is that a virus that spreads easily and within seconds resists any mobilization of countermeasures. Froula and Vint make similar arguments that also engage with the idea of virulence, imperialism, and rapid movement, but not what appears to be an ideological predilection—in existing scholarship about fast zombies and in scholarship just about speed—to moralize quickness, in terms of hasty actions and thought processes, as negative to begin with. For instance, take Virilio’s examination of fear and terror in relation to speed: he claims

Terror is not simply an emotional and psychological phenomenon, but a physical one as well in the sense of physics and kinetics, a phenomenon related to what I call the ‘acceleration of reality.’ Arendt uses the expression ‘law of movement’ to refer to the fact that there is no relationship to terror without a relationship to life and speed. Terror cuts to the quick: it is connected to life and quickness through technology (*The Administration of Fear* 21).

Virilio is theorizing speed as a figure on its own, but although terror might be experienced differently if the conditions that cause it are subject to acceleration, there is an inherent assumption here that there is a negative relationship between speed, terror, and violence. Speed as violent and terrifying can be seen and lived vicariously by viewers in zombie film when inexplicably fast zombies suddenly give chase, their horrific vitality pitted against the adrenaline-fueled flight of their victims, but it begs the question: why should violence or the anticipation of violence and terror be understood as fast, or at least, *only* as fast? In this
chapter, I want to suggest that speed is working in a number of complex ways: first, high speed is problematically equated with violence and virulence in a way that suggests that slowness—in part moralized via careful, rational thought and action as opposed to haste and supposedly un-reflective thought and action—is always non-violent. Insofar as slowness is understood in terms of rational thought, it is anthropocentric and corresponds with a particular way of viewing human beings as opposed to non-human animals, which are often erroneously represented as violent and reactive. But in fact, the film manipulates viewer experience of time and motion to influence how one interprets violence: in order to consider something slow, its other, quickness, must be present and vice versa. Often, fast framing and filming techniques are juxtaposed or combined with extended moments or scenes that to my mind prompt the viewer to recognize that violence can also be slow—sometimes made invisible by the cloak of normalization under which the violence of sexism, speciesism, and racism go un-noticed—and so a simplistic moralization of high speed as violent is challenged. Considering speed, I will explore how anthropocentrism and the human figure in the film—ultimately represented by the white, military, British men in the context of British Empire—draw attention to how women, racial minorities, and animals are and have been historically othered and exploited in the name of a fantasy figure of the human, and in a manner that is not violently fast, but violently slow. For instance, the mundane and gradual way that a military brigade grooms female protagonists Hannah (Megan Burns) and Selena (Naomie Harris) for sexual subordination and rape—an example I will explore in more detail later in the chapter—reflects centuries of normalized sexism against women rather than a sudden and un-precedented act that would only occur in a singular and extreme situation. The film builds a discursive concept of the human based on its difference from the infected in
terms of speed and animality, but I argue that by collapsing ontological boundaries between human, animal, and infected via the central metaphor of virulence and oscillating speed, this difference is ultimately refuted. As such, the human figure is revealed as artifice, and recognizing it as such means cultivating a growing intolerance for the violence committed against those positioned precariously outside its speed limits.

**I Ran With a Zombie: Speed, Fear, and Leaving Slow Zombies in the Dust**

In Chapter 4, I troubled the notion that “‘we know a zombie when we see one’” (Dendle qtd. in Christie 71). That is, film audiences recognize certain criteria that codify the zombie as a zombie: the figure of the zombie that shambled through the Anglo-American cultural imaginary was one crippled by decay, sometimes mute and sometimes moaning through failing vocal cords, shambling relentlessly and mindlessly towards the living in ever increasing numbers and driven by the insatiable desire to consume their flesh. Moreover, both critics argue that it is the context that typically signifies when we are looking at a “zombie” film: the setting is always apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic in nature, and, in line with this discussion of velocity and speed, we are greeted by the rapid failure and deterioration of civilization and its infrastructures, particularly channels of communication. These criteria were established in the late 1960s by George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and have persisted until the post 9/11 cycle of zombie films, giving us ways in which to ‘read’ the figure and its determining characteristics. On “The Sunday Edition” of *CBC Radio*, Frank Falk discussed how zombies are monsters who, uniquely, work in a group and reflect fears of being surrounded by crowds, of ecological disaster and global pandemic, and of a loss of ‘self,’ or perhaps more broadly, individuality. As I elucidated in Chapter 4, there is a curious tendency in current scholarship to determine the ontology of the zombie, which in
turn becomes a way to reify human being. In classifying zombies, for instance, Kevin Boon calls the zombies of *28 Days Later* “bio-zombies”; that is, zombies that are deprived of their essential self, either permanently or temporarily, by virus or other means” (58). These claims assume the essential nature of humans, particularly for Boon, who sees the zombie as a human who has lost cognizance. They assume the inevitable reinstatement and reestablishment of both the human subject and of the zombie figure itself, which is diametrically opposed to the human, yet the zombie figure embodies contamination, impurity, and the blurring of boundaries between living subject and inanimate object, between human and animal, and therefore implicitly defies fixed meaning in that it is often subject and object at once. As Lauro and Embry argue, “the zombie’s irreconcilable body (both living and dead) raises the insufficiency of the dialectical model (subject/object)” (“A Zombie Manifesto” 87). The zombie is, as I suggested in relation to *Resident Evil*, a figure in flux, and yet there is a resistance from scholars and zombie fans alike to the zombie’s ability to move forward—not at a shamble or a lurch, but at a terrifying full speed run. There has been ongoing resistance to the running zombie, and yet the popularity of nimble, sprinting zombies has only increased.

Despite the increasing popularity of the sprinting zombie in film, a large body of fans and zombie ‘purists,’ so to speak, are dismissive if not actively hostile towards the notion of a fast moving zombie, thus suggesting the problematic ways in which critics and fans, to some extent, are locked into an ideological allegiance with Romero’s shambling, mournful zombie. Danny Boyle himself fell prey to this limited typography: in an interview with Tom Charity in 2002, he grimaced when *28 Days Later* was called a souped up zombie film because “the film is directed at you and me” (72); in other words, he missed the allegorical
import of the figure he was using. He argued at the time that “‘you cannot make a zombie movie today…It’s absolutely clear looking at those 1970s films, they came out of nuclear paranoia…nuclear weapons are still here, . . . that paranoia is still the same’”. Wanting to appeal to a large demographic and not a niche market, Boyle suggested, “[s]ee, it’s not a film about monsters—it’s a film about us!” (72). Insofar as Boyle means that the film is about people, I would argue that the zombie subgenre is one that is by nature “all about us”, and that Boyle’s infected became “all the rage” because they resonate with incremental anxieties about global pandemic and the instability of exactly who is named by “us.” Problematically though, Boyle means “human”; a term that he takes as a given and a falsely all-inclusive constituency. The term “human” is one that is also uncertain given the issue of biological warfare that suffuses the narrative, and that depends on the valuing of some lives more than others. As such, a film about global pandemic and biological warfare is invested at its core in anthropocentrism.\footnote{As will become clear shortly, Boyle’s film implies that the “human” is a construct based on the exceptionalism of white, British, military men. Boyle retracted his statement in an interview in 2003, after the film’s success, when he conceded that 28 Days Later was a horror/zombie film conceptualized with The Omega Man (1971) in mind (Hunter 78). The Omega Man is based on Richard Matheson’s novel I am Legend (1954), in which scientist Robert Neville is the only survivor of a war-born pandemic that creates symptoms of vampirism in the infected. The novel follows his lonely days in abandoned Los Angeles. There are obvious parallels between Neville and Jim, who finds London likewise empty as the result of a pandemic, except for the infected. Filmic adaptations of the novel include The Last Man On Earth (1964), I am Omega (2007) and I am Legend (2007).} That is to say, the film in many ways reiterates anthropocentrism, yet what I discover in the discourse of slow zombies is a moral predisposition in Western culture to slowness rather than speed, and which manifests in different ways in the zombie subgenre.

In 28 Days Later, this discovery ultimately undermines the anthropocentrism that the film seems to support at various junctures.
When asked for his opinion on the fast zombie phenomenon, Romero appealed to both horror convention and a sort of teratological logic: he reasons that Michael Myers from *Halloween* calmly walks towards his victims, and that Christopher Lee’s mummy movies inspired fear because the mummy, like the slow zombie, would just keep coming in a manner that was maddeningly slow yet unavoidable. Romero claims “to me, that’s scarier: this inexorable thing coming at you and you can’t figure out how to stop it. Aside from that, I do have rules in my head of what’s logical and what’s not. I don’t think zombies can run. Their ankles would snap!” There is the sense with these monsters that no matter how fast one runs, slow zombies will eventually catch up. I contend that what causes fear in this situation is the time it takes as a rational human being to attempt to process the horror that resists processing, as opposed to the immediate, instinctual, and reactive response one might have when things are happening too quickly to think, and which are associated in anthropocentric terms with non-human animals rather than human animals. Arguably then, slow zombies invoke fear in a way that is accepted as being more reasonable and befitting for the cognizant human figure. More, to invest in slowness in this case is to invest in zombie ontology that in some ways defines them as distinct from humans: in many online forums, the scare factor and plausibility of slow versus fast zombies is debated vehemently and sometimes bitterly between fans, many of whom echo Romero in claiming that fast zombies such as Danny Boyle’s “infected” have lost what it is that makes them zombies—presumably because they are living, and more so because their life is signified by their mobility and speed. Online champions of the slow zombie rely on the expertise of medical personnel and the realities of rigor mortis in order to argue that a fast zombie could never exist, while others maintain that

---

107 See Tammy Oler. Romero makes this same claim loudly in *Diary of the Dead* (2008), See Chapter 2.
zombies are simply not supposed to be fast because it gives them an advantage. One commenter simply asserts that that fast zombies are simply not classified as zombies, especially the ones that did not die to begin with.\textsuperscript{108} In other words, these assertions imply that zombies are supposed to remain safely distinct from humans. First and foremost, they are supposed to be dead and thus slow. For Dendle, the slow zombie holds an appeal for the current generation in that it is an uncomplicated figure; its goals and desires—to eat flesh, brains, or to simply destroy—are not difficult to understand: “the slow, dumb zombie—visible and eminently predictable—appeals to a generation with enough real monsters to worry about whose motives and methods are constantly changing. This part is fantasy, not horror: there is comfort in the zombie’s relative incompetence” (186).\textsuperscript{109} As such, the zombie figure tends to be reassuring so long as it remains other to the human subject, inherently incompetent, and thus, a weak threat to both civilization and the figure of the human that is at the heart of an anthropocentric worldview. Arguably though, if zombies are fast and alive, they are uncomfortably close to the living human subject and are not as easily dehumanized as their dead, slow counterparts.\textsuperscript{110}

Implicit in the privileging of slow zombies is perhaps a clue to understanding why fast zombies have infected the cultural imagination in the last 14 years: if slow zombies

\textsuperscript{108} See Convinceme: Start a Debate, “Fast Zombies vs Slow Zombies,” www.convinceme.net. This one example is indicative of fan investment in the debate, particularly since this single thread has been ongoing from 2007 to 2013.

\textsuperscript{109} Dendle cites “homegrown terrorism” as one real threat that resonates with millennials, including the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and the Columbine shootings in 1999. These events point to terrorism within their own social spheres rather than from distant regions, from kids that look remarkably like they do. Like zombies, who bear an outward resemblance to the living or uninfected, they pose the same inability to identify a threat from within a system (186).

\textsuperscript{110} When I use dehumanization here, I mean in the sense that a fantasy figure of the human allows for dehumanization by assuming there is an agreed upon, universal human that can be dehumanized. Since this is not the case, as I argue, the term is problematic. I am not using ‘animalization’ in this particular instance because to some extent, as I will address in a later section of this chapter, the film does problematically animalize the infected/zombies.
existed, there would not only be time to outrun them, but time to mobilize and create countermeasures. Whether these are successful or not (and most of the time they are not), there is a sense that the crisis can be dealt with; there are steps that can be taken to assess and mitigate the threat. As exemplified by a small production company called “Zombies Don’t Run Productions” which proclaims: “we exist because running zombies don’t” (Dendle 181), slow zombies allow time to intellectually process and respond to events, while fast zombies link speed to reaction, immediacy, and accelerated destruction. Nevertheless, in Hollywood productions the popularity of energetic, frenzied zombies proliferates. Although Dendle argues that the fast zombies too are just as transparent and predictable as the slow ones (185), they cannot be dealt with effectively because their assault is akin to a blitzkrieg. Unlike the shambling zombie figure, fast zombies pose a relentless, sudden, and unexpected threat that cannot be adequately prepared for because there is not time to develop a survival strategy, to process events, or to take shelter in an abandoned farmhouse; one either reacts immediately and instinctually or is killed. As such, fast zombies do not allow the kind of careful, organized, and structured thought that seems to be one of the anthropocentric cornerstones of human being in the way that slow zombies do. One notable example comes from a scene midway through 28 Days Later, in which protagonist Jim (Cillian Murphy) ventures alone into an abandoned diner and is subsequently attacked by an infected child. Upon entry, Jim evaluates the dark space full of pitifully decomposing bodies carefully, slowly, and cautiously, and he is armed with a baseball bat in the event of unexpected surprises. However, in falling back upon the conventional and rational course of calling ‘hello?’ as a way to establish meaningful communication with any survivors he might find and to establish his presence and invite a response in kind, he instead is attacked by an
infected boy incapable of rational communication and thought. The boy drops silently and quickly into frame behind Jim to charge frenetically at his back. It is only Jim’s sharp reflexes as he hears a slight noise and wheels around without hesitation to swing the bat at his attacker that saves him from death or infection. Having pinned the straining infected boy to the floor with one foot, Jim pauses just long enough to see that he is just a child before killing him with the bat. At this point in the film, Jim has learned that a moment’s thought or hesitation can lead to death, and so the scene is significant in that Jim relies on a necessary violent reactiveness; he is unable to rely on planning, communication, or empathy in a world where the infected attack so quickly. By contrast, survivors in Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) have the ability to outrun the slow zombies for a time, giving them an opportunity to develop and assess several plans for escape or survival and to gather information—albeit ineffectual—from the news from the tenuous safety of the farmhouse in which they barricade themselves. Although all the survivors in *Night* die, there is a relative comfort in the idea that there is time available to plan the fortification of the space they are in above ground, or to lock themselves in the basement. In effect, slow zombie narratives adhere to an anthropocentric privileging of slowness that is grounded in rationality and careful, strategic thought, while fast zombie narratives foreclose the possibility of this kind of engagement.

In order to re-establish an ontological distance between the human and the zombie, Boyle’s film seems to focus on zombie hypervelocity linked with an anthropocentric concept of animalistic behavior as problematically violent and fast. However, this is a means of animalization that does not hold as the film eventually explores the similitude between human and non-human animal, and consistently troubles the notion of increased speed—in
terms of insufficiently reflective, logical thought and actions—as inherently violent and destructive. Beneath seemingly trite arguments about the scariness or plausibility of fast versus slow zombies is an allegiance to Romero’s figure and to maintaining a distinct human subject. The point is not to belabor arguments about which zombie figure is scarier, but to acknowledge that the behavioral and determining characteristics of this figure have been constantly evolving, and are not bound to a given ontology. Paramount to this change post 2001 is, for better or worse, ever-increasing speed, which is not surprising: the Anthropocene Age, which is driven by the impact of human activity on the Earth, is widely understood in terms of the rapid rate of human growth and activity that is also known as the Great Acceleration. Pointing out that even since the 1950s we have seen the fastest “transformation of the human relationship with the natural world in the history of humankind”, Will Steffen et al. argue that “[t]he term ‘Great Acceleration’ aims to capture the holistic, comprehensive and interlinked nature of the post-1950 changes simultaneously sweeping across the socio-economic and biophysical spheres of the Earth System, encompassing far more than climate change” (82). That is to say, in the last 500 years, humans as a species have created unprecedented changes to the earth’s geography, biosystems, and so on, particularly in the last 65 years. In this trend one can see that acceleration is germane to developments in technology, culture, communication systems, and the Anthropocene at large, a fact that is seen as disastrous and deadly in 28 Days Later. I propose, then, that the fast zombie is the next logical step for the evolution of the zombie figure: as human impact on the earth becomes more pronounced and accelerated, zombies become faster to adapt to the times. What is significant about this is that rather than attesting to the fixity of ontology, the zombie figure’s changing form and speed develops alongside the human, indicating the constant
mutability of both. If this is the case, the zombie is posthuman in its resistance to definition and stagnation.

In contrast to slow zombie narratives, fast zombie narratives stress the dizzying speed of societal disintegration: in Snyder’s remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), Milwaukee, Wisconsin and presumably the world are overrun by zombies over the course of one night, and they reanimate within minutes. When Ana’s (Sarah Polley) husband dies of blood loss from a zombie bite in an opening scene, he reanimates and attacks swiftly and brutally, and proceeds to run at full speed after Ana as she narrowly escapes in her car. This scene is echoed in other productions like *Dead Set* (2008) and *28 Days Later* (2002), in which tense moments emphasize the uncanny speed of zombies, a fact made more frightening since technically dead zombies, unlike their prey, do not need to breathe to maintain their kinetic output, and the living ones are so driven by their sickness that they run heedlessly up stairs and even while on fire as they are unable or unwilling to be distracted by pain, muscle fatigue, or burning lungs, both literal and figurative. As Columbus (Jesse Eisenberg), a shy Texan college student somberly reminds us in *Zombieland* (2009), rule number one for survival against this new breed of zombies is “Cardio.” Survivors who cannot run, cannot stay up to speed, and cannot react quickly enough become easy prey. *28 Days Later* makes this horrifyingly clear after Jim (Cillian Murphy) is almost overtaken in the stairwell of an apartment complex when the infected get in and he struggles to keep up with Selena, who screams at him to “RUN!” Everything relies on the pressure applied by speed and immediacy, and the survivors of the zombie apocalypse in *28 Days Later* resist this pressure in moments of slowness.
Ironically, the slow moments that enable human connection can only be found once the Great Acceleration has finally ground to a halt: that is, once human activity has and rapidly ebbed due to the failure of transportation, technological, and support systems, slowness rather than speed is represented as the hallmark of anthropocentrism. The speed of institutional and resource disintegration in the film stresses just how quickly the average person would run out of food, water, and basic necessities, and how few people would be prepared to survive any large crisis, particularly if alone, so that the speed previously associated with human progress hastens its demise. In 28 Days Later, a basic lack of survival skills and depletion of previously accessible resources for sustenance is made explicit as Jim wanders London, scavenging chocolate bars and soda from broken vending machines. When he is later rescued from the infected by Selena and Mark and informed of their dire situation, he is offered more of the same by way of sustenance as there is nothing else. The urban sprawl of the city contains only processed ‘junk food” for which the survivors have to forage. In a matter of four weeks since the outbreak of Rage, the survivors must adapt a prehistoric approach to living: Mark tells Jim that you never go anywhere alone unless you have no choice, and you never travel by night unless you have no choice. Like their ancestors, they sleep together quietly in the dark, travel by foot in daylight, and survive on what meager provisions they find. As Selena and Jim climb the stairwell in an abandoned apartment complex, the short-term insufficiency of their sustenance is made clear as Jim, weak from fatigue and a migraine caused by lack of water and nutritional food, is forced to stop. The general ineptitude of the average person in surviving without complex societal support systems is also stressed when Selena and Jim meet Frank (Brendon Gleeson) and his daughter Hannah, who have been hiding in their flat. A shot of the family goldfish struggling
in the partially evaporated water of their fishbowl makes clear the dire need for water and by implication, food. The fish’s plight is, in fact, a metaphor for the urban fishbowl in which the survivors are trapped. Frank and Hannah had been foraging in abandoned flats for food and water and futilely trying to collect rain via empty buckets on the vast roof of their building, but they let the fish struggle in the water they do have instead of killing it. Unlike Selena, they are not willing to believe that their circumstances mean that they should value any life less than their own. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious that time is running out, and staying in the building and the city is not possible. In fact, in prior scenes in which Mark, Selena, and Jim work their way out of London proper, the city is framed through bars that signal urban space, much like the fishbowl, as a cage or prison. The fact that none of the survivors in the film seem capable of securing food outside a vending machine or the canned goods aisle in a grocery store indicates the general helplessness of most urban populations if the importation of food and water were to suddenly stop; even the would be military saviors later in the film are at a loss in preparing edible food; Private Jones (Leo Bill) attempts to serve rotten eggs made palatable by salt, and this is the one mention of attempting to consume animal products in the entire film. Most of the survivors discover that they have the ability to kill each other to survive an attack, but none of them hunt. Notably, these scenes in the film barely involve the infected at all; they are slow-paced and afford the characters time to logically formulate their plans and strengthen their bonds. It is these early moments afforded by slowness or stillness that allow the development of interpersonal connections and the kind of rigorous thought and planning associated with being ‘human’, but they also exacerbate scenes of frenzy and terror by comparison, which are all the more dramatically and kinetically charged. However, a focus on the violence and terror of increased speed in some ways distracts from
the slow violence of some of these sequences: for instance, Frank and Hannah’s London flat is a place of slow starvation and resource depletion, a fact that does not support the idea that only things that are fast are in some way violent.

Speed not only refers to the rate of societal disintegration; it informs the rate of technological advancements and the correlated increasing and unsustainable demands in Western society for instant gratification and endless productivity that are part of the Great Acceleration and the Anthropocene. Instant gratification and productivity are largely responsible for what Bertman refers to as “future shock,” a psychobiological state where people cannot adjust to change fast enough (“Warp Speed” 1). This phenomenon leads to building psychological pressure and stress, and informs the narrative of 28 Days Later: the result of an incurable and highly contagious virus, the infected grow in number and lays waste to the country before people even understand what is happening, let alone have a chance to react to it or prepare for what is coming. In some sense then, the Anthropocene appears to be approaching a speed limit, a desire to slow down. Scholars who theorize speed—in zombie films or in general—nonetheless have an uncanny tendency to link the concept to virulence, suggesting a correlation between rapid movement, violence, infection, and the zombie figure in film after the turn of the millennium. This connection raises what appears to be an unexamined ideological predilection by critics who understand violence as always synonymous with speed: for instance, writing in 1998, even before the proliferation of social media, Bertman notes that “the media we use, rather than allowing us to relax as a result of their efficiency, will instead keep revving us up with their infectious speed” (5). Similarly, Virilio notes the damaging ways in which we are preoccupied with and by progress, the promotion of which “means that we are always behind: on high-speed internet,
on our Facebook profile, on our email inbox. There are always updates to be made, we are the objects of daily masochism and under constant tension” (The Administration of Fear 47). Virilio’s focus on speed and technology would have us believe that “our societies have become arrhythmic”… “[o]r they only know one rhythm: constant acceleration. Until the crash and systemic failure” (“Terror is the Realization” 27). This claim assumes that speed must necessarily equal societal failure, and that human societies are defined only by increasing speed rather than an oscillation between slow and fast experiences.

Germane to the zombie narrative is the inevitability of the system crash: the failure of communication systems, the impotence of government and military forces to protect, defend, or respond effectively to crisis, and the frightening rate at which human civilizations fail to effectively respond to threats, but this is not necessarily related to acceleration. Speed does not just name the rate of a zombie attack in the film, but the relative ease with which society disintegrates. Innovations that increase speed are meant to increase efficiency and regeneration, and yet the implementation of speed is offset by the desire to think slowly and clearly, particularly in a crisis. What is missing but ultimately valued is time: time to plan, to prepare, to think and strategize, and when this time is not available speed is demonized and feared. Insufficient risk management and knee-jerk reactions to threats are emphasized in the work of Vint, Froula, and Carroll—who all focus on 28 Days Later—but one has to wonder why violence need necessarily be understood as fast. Implicit in the criticism about speed on the one hand and speed in zombie films on the other is a tendency to moralize speed; as if that which happens slowly is always non-violent by comparison. Especially when considering the slow, implacable progression of glacier melt and global warming, it is obvious that slow events can and do enact their own violence, even if it is less immediately
obvious or visible than, for instance, homicide, mass murder, or animal cruelty. It must be kept in mind that a viewer’s experience of time in film is always being manipulated: for instance, in the film’s opening scene, in which a group of animal rights activists attempt to free chimpanzees infected with the Rage virus, a female activist is bitten and changes within seconds, vomits infected blood into the face of a companion, and attacks the scientist on duty. Nevertheless, the scene itself unfolds relatively slowly; while the immediacy of infection is stressed, the terror associated with speed is instilled by slowly building to a climax and by introducing the viewer to speed’s other, slowness, as a comparative state. Clearly then, violence does not take speed as a pre-requisite, although it seems that in order to stress the urgency or importance of violence, there is often a tendency to make it fast.

Speaking of slow violence in particular, Nixon argues that we often redefine speed by digitally speeding up time, and he implies that in order for us to care about slow violence—glacier melt, for instance—it has to be reinterpreted as an unbearably fast loss (“Introduction” 13). On that note, it should be kept in mind that the Anthropocene and the Great Acceleration, as the name suggests, indicates that the activity and impact of human enterprise on the Earth is accelerating and already is unbearably fast. As I mentioned, human beings have altered the Earth significantly in a relatively short amount of time over the course of the planet’s history, and in this sense, human-facilitated global warming is very fast indeed. In 28 Days Later, manipulation of time via but not limited to time-lapse photography makes the viewer hyper aware of things that appear to happening far too quickly. The unfolding of the Rage infection is linked with the rapid passage of time: in a mere four weeks, one of the world’s most prestigious and markedly busy, kinetic cities is found by Jim, the film’s central protagonist who wakes from a coma, to be completely empty—except for
cadavers and the infected. In fact, the film manipulates the viewer’s perception of the passage of time so that the period between the first infection and the decimation of England passes in the blink of an eye. One tagline for the film proclaims, “the days are numbered,” and the apparent rapidity with which the apocalypse descends is terrifying. The film’s DVD cover provides a timeline for the spread of Rage and for the end of Britain: “Day 1: Exposure - Day 3: Infection - Day 8: Epidemic - Day 20: Evacuation - Day 28: Devastation.” Implied in this chronology is concern about the sudden prevalence of an incurable and deadly disease that is not only localized but diffuse, and it is conveyed as a near immediate occurrence in film time to heighten terror. The film selectively speeds time in some scenes and slows time in others, making the difference between fast and slow moments increasingly polarized.

In the scene in which Jim wakes from a coma and searches futilely for other people, it is the lack of frenzied motion, the silence, stillness, and inertia in sweeping and eerily beautiful panoramic views of London landmarks like Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and Westminster Bridge that make it so unsettling. The scene makes the viewer uncomfortably aware of the uncanniness of the stagnant city that is typically teeming with people via the shaky camera work, uncanny sunset lighting, and Jim’s slow but steadily building panic as the score builds in dread and intensity. An establishing wide angle shot of Westminster Bridge frames it as silent, empty, and littered with debris: beneath it the Thames slips steadily and silently by, free of cruises and river traffic. Atop the bridge, lit by the waning orange light of sunset, Jim appears lost and frail in his green hospital gown and with his overgrown, unkempt hair. The sunset is beautiful but ominous: poised against the

---

111 The idea of having “numbered days” evokes apocalypse, as does an inscription that Jim sees inside a church that has biblical overtones and reads, “The end is very fucking nigh.” This is an important theme in the film that I will address in part near the end of the chapter, but my thoughts on apocalypse and endings in the subgenre can be found in the Conclusion of the dissertation.
abandoned and recently great city, it conveys a sense of nightmarish unreality and horror at the promise of oncoming night in a metropolis that has become a ghost city. Emphasizing this atmosphere is the use of an edited version of *Godspeed You! Black Emperor*’s musical score, “East Hastings-The Sad Mafioso,” which begins with the ambient sounds of a door creaking, subtle and almost sly clunking, and slightly off key, wavering tones that sound like wind hollowly moving through desolate landscapes. These sounds fade in and out against the slow pluckings of a slightly off tune lone guitar to create a simple, dark, foreboding, and almost elegiac sound as Jim fruitlessly calls “Hello.” In shots framing Jim at street level, the camera is handheld to create a subtle jittery and unstable effect that reflects Jim’s confusion and inner turmoil as he wanders the abandoned streets in increasing loneliness and fear. As Jim moves slowly through the streets of London, the musical score keeps pace and the sense of isolation and abandonment he feels in the stagnant city is emphasized by high-angle shots in which Jim appears like an ant at the base of towering, silent buildings that are filmed at a slight angle to emphasize the nightmarish quality of the scene as well as Jim’s increasing sense of disorientation. As Jim makes his way toward Piccadilly Circus, he passes a double decker bus on its side and is framed through one of its broken windows, as if the city, or something else, is watching his progress. The subsequent sense of stillness, vulnerability, and watchfulness in the scene begins to take on an increasingly uncanny and threatening quality that precedes the terrifying introduction of the hyper-kinetic infected to come. As Jim collects discarded pound notes, the camera begins to move quickly and jerkily, panning suddenly with blurry speed from a stationary shot of the street to Jim on the Carleton House Terrace steps in St. James’s. The musical score here also increases in tempo so that both auditory sounds and visual images resonate with the building of Jim’s panic as he begins to
realize without a doubt that he is truly abandoned and something terrible has happened in the outside world during his coma. When Jim finally reaches Piccadilly Circus at the climax of the scene, a high angle shot shows Jim—miniscule, alone and exposed—in one of the now silent and formerly busiest locations in London, and thus heightens his sense of abandonment and insignificance. A shot of Jim walking in the foreground juxtaposes him against a billboard in the distance featuring an advertisement with three smiling girls. The result is a startling disconnect between the typical overflow of shoppers, conversations, and flashing images at the square and the current moment in which Jim is the only living soul to be seen. The casual, carefree, and happy smiles of the girls in the advertisement only emphasize Jim’s expression of disquiet and despair by contrast. At the climax of the scene, the impression of London as an ominous and dangerous place is heightened when Jim attempts to open an abandoned car and is met by the blaring, startling wail of a car alarm that is far too loud in the new stillness. The sound of it, so commonplace in day to day life, is startling for Jim and the viewer in the silent metropolis. Moreover, Jim staggers back from the car and looks around, panting, as if he is afraid of what the sound might draw. The formerly subdued tempo of the musical score builds to a climax here and the drums begin to sound like the frantic beating of Jim’s heart. In this scene, the movement from slow and controlled framing techniques and music to more frenetic ones allow the viewer to tap into the uneasy atmosphere of the scene and Jim’s emotional agony.

The usual break-neck speed of activity in London is implied by contrast to the still city when Jim, a bicycle courier and the film’s central protagonist, reveals that the reason for his 28 day coma is that he was hit by a car while delivering a package. The constant rush of people impatiently trying to reach their destination at the very least factors into his accident.
Indeed, modern society is relentlessly bombarded with accelerated media, images, longer working hours in a culture of 24/7 demands for availability, and afforded no time to decompress or cultivate stillness. The sequence in which Jim wanders the abandoned metropolis is an important transition: what it suggests is that despite critics’ emphasis on speed, the film is actually obsessed with time. These moments before Jim’s entreaties for anyone to answer his calls provokes the first rapid attack of the infected, it becomes clear that they can only appear fast if slowness is present as well. In this sense, it is no wonder that the infected strike the viewer as un-naturally fast and violent; we are slow thinkers obsessed with speed: characterized by their jerky, spasmodic movements and predatory full speed run, the infected seem to embody, hyperbolize, and allegorize the mad rush of former London and the irrational impatience, like road rage, that can come with urban life. In “No More Room in Hell,” Heinze and Petzold actually refer to the infected as zombies that appear to be “on speed”, and they act with a purposefulness and single-mindedness that is terrifying. The zombies modeled after Romero’s films are as likely to walk past a person as they are to attack them, and “the drastically accelerated corporeality of the 28 Days Later zombies gives witness to single—rather than absent—mindedness” (59) that is rooted in rage. The infected are single-mindedly focused on externalizing their homicidal impulses: for instance, in an early scene in which Jim flees from a church with the infected in pursuit, one of their number is engulfed in flame. Despite the unspeakable pain of burning alive, the flaming infected does not collapse or attempt any form of self-preservation. Frighteningly, it actually speeds up and redoubles its attempt to overtake Jim. The infected, then, are propelled by fury, unhindered by pain, and are a terrifying vision of a society driven mad by imperatives for speed and “progress” at the height of the Anthropocene. They are a fitting evolutionary development of
the zombie figure in that they respond and adapt ruthlessly to these imperatives, as I will discuss in the next section.

**Global Pandemic in 28 Days: Viral Rage and “Real-Life” Resonance**

As our culture moves faster, zombies sprint to overtake us, and in *28 Days Later* the Rage virus is presumably a derivative of culturally constructed situations where human desires are deferred even if by mere moments, or by generalized violence and hatred towards others. That is, in a sense of going viral, the idea that infects us—disseminated and shared repeatedly—is perhaps that our need for instant gratification and the potential thwarting of that need being met predisposes us to violence and rage. Boyle comments that the condition of the infected in his film is a reference “to the social distemper that journalists have dubbed rage: road rage, air rage, shopping rage, and their ilk” (Charity 72), all of which are related in part to acceleration and impatience. Social distemper is a turn of phrase with a specific antecedent since the infected display symptoms of rabies, and the etymology of rage from the middle French *raige* and the classical Latin *rabiēs* means insanity, madness, a violent outburst of anger, and also the rabies virus. Part of the terror of infection comes from the image of the human body consuming itself: the infected can be understood in part as a synecdoche for the feverish, frenzied single mindedness that comes from focusing narcissistically on our own individualistic materialism and responsibilities, so much so that similar to the infected, we can remember to be frustrated but often are so busy and hyper-focused we neglect to eat. As if to take this metaphor to the extreme, the infected all eventually die from natural causes, not exposure so much as starvation. Fittingly, for both Virilio and Bertman, the result of increasing speed, which is linked to increased

---

technologization, is a tendency for people to lash out: for instance, Bertman notes that there is a link between job stress, workplace violence, and murder in the workplace, claiming that it is “America’s fastest growing form of homicide” (8), while Virilio argues that given the tremendous pressure to keep up with the demands of velocity, a wrong look or a greeting can result in stabbings or other forms of violence; “we are in the fit of rage” (“Administering Fear” 53). It is this building pressure, this inability to keep up to speed coupled with the contradictory need to push harder, further, and more productively that predisposes people to overreact to a perceived insult, a traffic jam, or anything that hinders their progress. Speed, information, virulence and violence are intimately entwined concepts, but ones that are predisposed to see velocity’s endpoint as violent and destructive. Virilio theorizes rage—not the virus in the film but the real life experience of rage that is impulsive, immediate, and occurs before deliberation is possible—as contagious based on the rate of acceleration in modern life. However, I think it likely that in 28 Days Later, the Rage virus—violent, rapid, and readily transmissible—has to do with the idea that increased speed is perceived as negative rather than being inherently negative in and of itself. The infected, in turn, have evolved to embody the rage and acceleration that informs the current cultural moment.

In part, the infected dramatize and embody historical anxiety about global pandemic and by extension, the animalization of those who carry or suffer from disease. National Geographic’s documentary on the origins and popularity of the zombie also points to the very real historical devastation caused by epidemics like the Black Plague in England in the fourteenth century as well as the Spanish Flu (“The Truth Behind Zombies” 2010), which had devastating mortality rates for large populations. 28 Days Later is invested in dramatizing concern over epidemic and pandemic on a global scale in the wake of HIV and
bovine spongiform encephalopathy epidemics in the 1980s and 1990s which were sweeping through America and Great Britain. Ongoing current debates between pro and anti-vaccination groups suggests a current climate of tension around the re-emergence and spread of diseases like polio or smallpox that could spread rapidly and with devastating effect. In 28 Days Later, Selena explains the situation in London and Britain in general to Jim as follows: “it was a virus. An infection. You didn’t need doctors to tell you that. It was the blood. It was something in the blood.” The means and velocity of viral transmission in the film is emphasized at various points, such as when Frank is infected by a single drop of blood that falls into his eye from an infected cadaver above him, and later when at a mansion seized and fortified by a military platoon, escaped infected Private Mailer (Marvin Campbell) vomits infected blood into the eyes and face of Private Clifton (Luke Malby), who spasms and immediately turns. Mere contact with the infected and their bodily fluids, particularly their blood, will result in irreversible contamination and impurity, which was precisely what people feared would be the outcome in the early days of HIV infection if they came into contact with afflicted individuals; ostensibly gay males and black people who were erroneously assumed to have the infection on the basis of sexual orientation or race. As Selena says of Rage, HIV was understood as something in the blood of the afflicted. Boyle makes the link between HIV and Rage explicit by emphasizing that Rage begins with a chimp bite. As Froula explains, the means of transmission for Rage recalls “cultural fears about AIDS transmission as well as embodying the post 9/11 panics over anthrax and the SARS, West Nile, Avian, and Swine flu viruses” (“Prolepsis” 198); Noel Brown too reads the “half-dead condition” of the infected “as a metaphor for AIDS, as the idea of a condition that originates among monkeys and quickly spreads throughout the normative white, middle
class” (“The Human Project” 132). In other words, viruses—with their lack of discrimination when it comes to ethnicity, gender, geographical boundaries and often species—can infiltrate anybody in relatively any location, regardless of class, race, sex, species, and so on, very much like zombie types across the full spectrum of the genre.

Insofar as zombies form a horde, they do not discriminate between those worthy or unworthy to join their ranks. Rather than prove the opposite, susceptibility to viruses and disease assert that there is nothing unique or exceptional about the human animal, which is why the infected of 28 Days Later are afflicted with a virus that crosses species boundaries. Rabies, of course, is one such virus. One of the most frightening facets of the Rage virus is its almost instantaneous transmission and onset. According to the film’s producer, Andrew MacDonald, the most pressing “invisible threat is the air”, or in other words, the new paranoia to date is about the bacteria in our environment and on our skin, viral infection that knows no physical boundaries, and the likelihood that diseases that predominate in non-human animals can and will make the jump to human animals (“Pure Rage” 28 Days Later DVD Special Feature). To elaborate on dis-ease about disease in contemporary times, presumably as a means of bioterrorism or general malignance, Boyle mentions that while filming, he became aware of two German scientists who created a synthetic polio virus and had found all required materials on the web. The ability of individuals to create viruses, and the ability of viruses themselves to mutate and develop resistance to antibiotics after decades of natural evolution, warns against being too confident that given enough time, humans can cure anything.113 The Rage virus of the film is itself perhaps synthetic, having been

---

113 This notion is played out in differing ways in Resident Evil, in which the creation of viruses result in uncontrollable apocalypse, and in WWZ (2013), which despite its happy ending ignores that it has discovered an inoculation but not an etiology for the virus. As I have suggested of the apocalypse created by the T-Virus in Chapter 4, the trope of viral pandemic that in most cases leads to irrevocable devastation stresses an anxiety
concentrated by humans in the form of violent images and forced upon chimps in order to study and ideally suppress or eliminate the ubiquitous rage that exists a priori in humans, or more ominously, to harness rage as a bioweapon. That is, Boyle’s representation of chimpanzees in the film casts them as victims of induced rage that is not inherent in them, while for humans, it is a biological reality. At work here is an implicit anxiety in the film that stems from the notion that despite anthropocentric claims to the contrary, non-human animals are no more essentially violent than humans are essentially rational. Further, the ease of interspecies transmission of viruses suggests that the human is not distinct from non-human animals on the basis of anatomy or susceptibility of disease. In other words, what is ultimately stressed is the similitude rather than the difference between human and non-human animals. This in turn makes it difficult to view the infected as animalized, or as somehow inferior to the human.

There is value in imagining a zombie apocalypse caused by a virus that has much in common with rabies; I argue that the aggression caused by Rage is profoundly antithetical to Enlightenment ideals regarding the rational human subject. In “The Truth Behind Zombies,” *National Geographic* posits that Rabies is an ideal candidate for a potential real Rage virus, since it is found in over 150 countries and territories and affects over 55,000 people per year. According to WWZ novelist Max Brooks in the same documentary, if it were to go airborne it

---

114 I should note here that the societies of actual chimps are hierarchal and thus displays of threat usually prevent the need for attack. However, in 1974 Dr. Jane Goodall “observed a 4 year territory war” in which one group killed the other, meaning that humans are not the only species to engage in war (“Chimpanzees: Warfare and Violence”). This behavior in real chimps suggests behavioral similarity between humans and their closest biological relatives; rational thought and behavior is sometimes used to execute violent acts of killing, and it is harder to justify the separation between human and animal on the basis of rationality or emotion with this in mind.
would cause a reaction similar to Rage, a conclusion echoed by Mathematical Epidemiologist Neil Ferguson who claims that it would cause extreme aggression. The frenzy of anger and rash impulses exhibited by the infected and uninfected alike in the film—as well as everyday situations in which people indulge hyper-aggressive impulses—enhance the plausibility and fear of pathogens as well as the implication that what is wrong cannot be cured. Like the near entirety of the film itself, the monitors reveal scenes shot on digital film and with hand-held cameras, suggesting that the information comes from news channels or from personal videos from individuals in the midst of chaos, and also to enhance realism by employing a docudrama style of filming that features grainy, shaky, and in-the-moment, streaming footage that is reactive rather than thoughtfully and carefully edited for public viewing. Boyle suggests that digital film is more fitting for urban environments, because our lives are mediated by cameras that are everywhere—“this is the way we live our lives” (“Pure Rage” DVD Commentary). It is fitting then, that much of the film is presented this way. In the opening scene, the viewer’s gaze is assaulted by random, repetitive images of human violence on a number of television monitors. The viewer is given no context for and no distance from the violent, rapidly changing, confused and altogether overwhelming images that assault the senses until the camera zooms out to reveal one chimp that is restrained on a table and also forced to watch. This filming technique gives the impression that the viewer is seeing what the chimp sees, and what is startling about this scene is how paradoxically unstartling it is, since the sheer intensity of violent images are nothing that one cannot see every day on current news reports. They all stress diverse yet uncannily familiar scenes of aggression, panic, and suffering: people running and screaming down a city street, a man cowering, head in hand, while a middle eastern man stabs him in the back, a mother wearing
a headscarf keening and rocking a dead baby while chaos erupts around her, a hanged man
being beaten, rioting, explosions, and police brutality all flood the helpless gaze of the viewer
and the restrained chimpanzee. Although the scene is shot in a manner that equates the
viewer’s sight with the chimpanzee’s sight, they are by no means the same. As the camera
zooms out to an overhead shot that literally positions the viewer above the chimpanzee
strapped to the table, the chimpanzee is ultimately represented as another image of routinized
violence, this time against non-human lab animals rather than animalized humans in an
anthropocentric framework. As such, the scene is compellingly and unflinchingly invested in
demonstrating the damage inflicted on living beings in the service of anthropocentrism and a
fantasy figure of the human. Boyle elaborates that “all the images of war and strife are before
the shit hits the fan”, and so these violent images reflect “reality as we already know and live
it” (qtd. in Charity 70). That is, human and non-human animal suffering and violence at the
hands of other humans is in no way new, which I contend is a sobering view for
anthropocentrism’s increasingly desperate grip on the idealized fantasy of a normative
human figure that enables the animalization of others and of non-human animals. As Froula
observes,

The archive footage of actual—and seemingly commonplace—torture and
human brutality, riots, explosions and fighting anticipates the atrocities of the
“War on Terror,” signified most prominently by Guantanamo Bay, Abu
Ghraib, and Haditha, and serves as a reminder that ‘everything’ did not
change on September 11, 2001. Rather, it underscores how typical it is for
individuals and communities to commit and to experience terrors, trauma, and
tragedy, highlighted in this scene by the sheer anonymity and excess of images. (“Prolepsis” 197)

Not only is the inability to perceive and control risk evident in these images; the brutality of the human animal is highlighted inside but predominantly outside an American context. The film raises concerns about who is subject to violence if those in question are not considered human in a host of real world contexts. Boyle makes obvious references to other recent and traumatic events in world history in the film, particularly those that are a result of imperialism, speciesism, and racism. *28 Days Later* is, to my mind, a timely moral response to violence and animalization in the real world—it poses important questions about who is human, who is not, and what acts of war, terror, and abuse are carried out because of the false dichotomy between these two states of being—that challenges an easy morality of speed that in turn reductively equates all things fast with violence and negativity.

Boyle’s film draws attention to the heinous and historically repetitive cycle of violence in human history in order to reveal and critique imperial doctrine based on the animalization of particular groups or individuals. There are myriad examples to draw from: as Jim wanders the empty streets of London he walks through a clutter of iconic Big Ben memorabilia and miniature British flags, indicating the futility and fall of British nationalism in the face of pandemic. At the heart of Piccadilly Circus, a Landmark advertising billboard featuring the statue of liberty is visible behind Jim, suggesting a similar sense of fear and bewilderment following 9/11. Froula notes further moments that resonate with repetitive cycles of violence in the film: “Jim pauses at a Piccadilly Circus kiosk that was modeled on a photograph from an earthquake in China, which nonetheless allegorically evokes Manhattan immediately after 9/11 with its handwritten notices, photographs of missing loved ones, and
desperate pleas for information” (199). This is London’s metaphorical equivalent to New York’s ground zero. Natural disasters as well as terrorist and human-made events are visually recalled, enhancing both the sheer volume of instances where humans demonstrate cruelty, an inability to develop contingency plans, and an inability to keep up and cope with emergency. Other specific historical events that assault the viewer include

Jim gathering wads of useless currency outside Buckingham Palace, which visually invokes scenes of the Khmer Rouge’s abandonment of Phnom Penh; Jim stepping into a church and seeing piles of bodies, which visually quotes images of Rwandan genocide; Jim encountering a dead mother clinging to her dead child, which evokes a photograph from Saddam Hussein’s gassing of the Kurds. (Froula 201)

This last image is repeated twice: once in an abandoned diner, and again in the onslaught of images seen by the chimp. There is a sickening banality about these images that Major West unflinchingly articulates at the dinner table later in the film. He claims that in the four weeks since infection, all he’s seen are “people killing people. Which is much what I saw in the four weeks before infection, and the four weeks before that, and before that, and as far back as I care to remember. People killing people. Which to my mind, puts us in a state of normality right now.” Here, then, are instances of neocolonialism and imperialism at work, but also slow violence: even though the film is concerned with velocity, Major West makes clear here the slow, steady, and normalized killing of other people at present and throughout history. Most horrific of all is the implication that despite moral judgments about speed that equals violence, after centuries of time to reflect on anthropocentrism—to employ a thoughtful and rational approach to the murder of others and on what basis—extreme expressions of
animalization and violence are ongoing. West’s words foreshadow the events to come after Selena, Hannah, and Jim eventually find the 42\textsuperscript{nd} brigade who promise the answer to infection. As Froula argues, the film anticipates the doctrine of imperialist view as well as its dependency on a culture of fear of continuously looming biological warfare, terrorism, and pandemic (195-196). Establishing this doctrine is, after all, how Major West will later go about justifying and enforcing plans to protect and propagate the human species via rape—by which the lesser value of females as humans when compared to males is made clear—and the murder of those like Jim and Captain Farrell (Stuart McQuarry) who forfeit their right to be considered human because they dissent. The imprisonment of these two men and the events leading up to their planned execution are, again, a series of slow-paced and drawn out scenes, rather than ones characterized by rapidity. As such, they continue to point out the horror of pre-mediated and carefully institutionalized animalization that undermines the idea that quick, undisciplined thoughts and actions alone lead to violence. With this in mind, it is useful to offer a counter-reading to some of the other frenetic moments of violence in the film and of violence in general. For instance, Virilio claims “the administration of fear is a world discovering that there are things to be afraid of but still convinced that more speed and ubiquity are the answer” (The Administration 11), and Vint claims post 9/11 America is suffering from an autoimmune disorder “in which the possibility for community is destroyed by a too-vigilant mechanism for detecting and annihilating infection” (139). While an argument can and should be made for the dangers of uncritically demonizing others and enacting violence accordingly, Vint and Virilio endorse the same ideological resistance to quickness insofar as it is fundamentally violent. Vint in particular reads the moment when Selena savagely murders her friend Mark as an expression of the same thoughtless
autoimmune response she discusses. In that scene, when Jim lights a candle in his parents’ house he mistakenly invites an attack by nearby infected individuals. Mark is bitten while saving Jim, at which point Selena savagely hacks Mark to death with her machete. The Rage virus does not allow time for thought, as it acts within 20 seconds, and so the response is immediate. Selena later tells Jim that once someone has been infected, no matter who they are or what they mean to you, you have between 10-20 seconds to kill them before they change. Time, then, and immediate response to threat, is apparently of the essence once infected body fluids come into contact with the surface of the eyes, the inside of the mouth, or abrasions in the skin. In Selena’s own words, to prevent attack one has to diffuse the threat on impulse, “in a heartbeat.” Nevertheless, in this scene speed is suggested by visual manipulation rather than elapsed time: the jerky, hand-held filming and visual fragmentation of the scene give the impression of a hyper-kinetic event, and Mark’s death may take 10-20 seconds in the narrative of the film, but it is almost un-bearably drawn out and visually detailed. It is how the film presents both time and speed that determines how speed is interpreted: by accentuating every horribly exquisite detail of spraying blood droplets, arm swings, and sounds, extending the time of some scenes that are framed in terms of speed actually enhances their violence.

**Imperialism, Speed, and Humanism**

*28 Days Later* is rife with critiques of imperialism in its references to imperial hierarchies and colonization based on slavery, racism, and sexism, all of which are a specific feature of late Western forms of anthropocentrism. In other words, that this film is both set and produced in a Western city suggests that Western modernity has come to define the Anthropocene in specific ways—for instance, in mediated representations in films
themselves that justify and naturalize exploitation—that may not resonate so strongly in non-Western cultures. In the second half of the film, Selena, Jim, and Hannah are taken to a mansion by a military brigade. This is significant because half of the film takes place in the mansion, and three-quarters of the second half features slow action and does not involve the infected at all. To my mind, the focus on decreased speed draws attention to how—in contrast to the hyper-kinetic infected—violence plays itself out in a space where there is plenty of time for people to evaluate their situation and their actions logically by comparison and to act accordingly. What happens instead is that the mansion sequences trouble the fantasy figure of the human, which in the film comes to mean white, male, heterosexual and British men in a colonial setting that invokes the slow violence of historical, colonial oppression and the animalization of colonized others and women in particular. Without the frenzy and immediacy of speed—which can be a distraction, or a justification for impulsive violence—the viewer is made painstakingly aware of how endorsing an exclusive category of the human in the film and in history as well results in the unjustified and brutal treatment of others. Indeed, the systematic oppression of women and racial minorities is undertaken over a long period of time in the film and in real life, and so there is no context in which a lack of careful, rational, and empathetic thought about this oppression can be justified. Inherent, for example, in Corporal Mitchell’s (Ricci Harnett) attitude and also in the survival tactics of the remaining military men who plan to ensure the continuation of the species, to rebuild, in West’s terms, by sexually enslaving girls and women, are the echoes of rape as a means of warfare and dominance and the continued control over female bodies. As Brown argues, “the allusion is to the use of sexual violence in war, the gendered history of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and nationalism. It is a direct reference to the Serbian practice of systematic rape
during the Bosnian war” as a means by which to humiliate, dominate, and ethnically cleanse by ensuring that pregnancies would result in the birth of future Serbian warriors (134). Thus, women raped in the Bosnian War are not even allowed their own humiliation; humiliation is allowed for their men alone, and only because the men’s property has been violated. The women are coded as pawns used by some men to humiliate and gain dominance over others, and they are certainly not considered human. To be clear, the system West is intent on rebuilding is a society in which empire, class, race, sex, and species are situated within patriarchal privilege and the systematic dominance over and exclusion of those outside the military infrastructure he upholds. Women are to be re-relegated to their ‘proper’ function as the property of men and as vehicles for childbirth and male pleasure, and garbed, as Brown points out, in evening gowns beneath a portrait of the lady of the Victorian, aristocratic mansion in which they are imprisoned (135). Scenes in which Hannah and Selena are forced to dress for the men and are taunted and then made to wait for their violation happen slowly, which prolongs the horrific expectation rather than diffusing it, as a shorter scene might have done. Indeed, the relish displayed by the soldiers in killing and blowing up waves of the infected are a testament to the bloodlust of soldiers interpellated by military ideology. For Brown, the mansion itself is a remnant of British colonialism, “former home to aristocratic representatives of a true England” (134) desperately protecting boundaries between the ruling class and outsiders with cannons and barbed wire. 115 From this perspective, one might say the resonance here is and has always been drawing a firm line between who is sufficiently human and who is not.

115 Brown reads in the defense of the estate against the infected “the bloody memory of the wars following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, particularly the memory of the siege of Sarajevo in 1993, in which British troops led NATO forces in a military intervention against the Serbs” (134).
The imprisonment of Private Mailer (Marvin Campbell), an African-American soldier infected days before Jim, Selena, and Hannah arrive at the mansion invokes the complex colonial history of slavery, racism, and the origins of the Haitian zombie. Animalization, then, is extended to other races in the film, and although he was a comrade, a member of their military ranks, the implication is that Mailer’s race as well as his infection exclude him. West tells Jim he is keeping Mailer alive in order to learn about the infected, particularly how long it will take them to starve. West claims Mailer is futureless: he will never bake bread, plant crops, or raise livestock. For West, having a future means having a purpose, and Mailer’s possible contributions are markedly menial tasks. Yoked with a chain around his neck and kept outside at the mercy of the elements, Mailer symbolizes the slave trade and the animalization of its victims. Mbembe likens slave life on plantations to a kind of “death-in-life” (161), where the slave is kept alive but “in a state of injury, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity” (160). In this context, Mailer’s deliberate drawn out suffering as a living being and experiment in the interest of knowledge and progress echoes the chimp scene at the film’s opening, the earlier correlations made between infectious HIV and black people, and also contextualizes his role as an object owned by West. He is, like the plantation slave and the Haitian zombie both under the control of a master, merely a shadow whose condition rises from the triple loss of “‘home,’ loss of rights over his or her body and loss of political status,” which ultimately amounts to his “expulsion from humanity altogether” (160). It is all too easy, then, to find oneself an insider reframed as an outsider, as Jim and Sergeant Farrell (Stuart McQuarry) both discover. Unsettlingly, the definition of human can be revised to tighten its parameters for inclusion at any time. Mailer is a disturbing reminder of neocolonialism and imperialism: Froula contends that “Mailer’s
dark skin signifies the terrors of the US-UK slave trade, but his tortured form also allegorizes the prisoners of the “War on Terror, “those the Bush administration renamed “detainees” and “enemy combatants” (202), like the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay. Given that the re-establishment of civilization that West wants to put into practice will be founded upon colonial rape fantasies and human normativity (where human means predominantly white, military, British men), the film is a warning against maintaining the status quo based on a false hierarchy of more and less human. The brutality of the infected, themselves driven by disease, is far less deplorable than the behavior demonstrated by West’s military unit; the infected at least have no logical capacity to actively decide to be violent, and the reality of this only highlights the violence, rage, and cruelty that pre-exists in the uninfected and which are undertaken in the film with deliberate slowness. Moreover, the final image of the infected comes in the Lake District as a military plane flies overhead, searching the green and hilly landscape for survivors. As the camera zooms to the ground, the viewer sees the emaciated, filthy, shirtless, and barely breathing bodies of two starving, infected men who stare vacantly and imploringly at the plane passing above them. The rage has been drained

\[116\] In addition to Mailer, Selena and the machete she yields appears to be an allusion to slave revolution. This image of the practically cold and guarded African American woman wielding blades is also seen in *The Walking Dead’s* Michonne (Danai Gurira), who carries kitanas. See Froula for a more detailed discussion of the colonial history of the slave trade in the UK and US, including Haiti.

\[117\] Interestingly, featured prominently in most of the key scenes and shots at the mansion is a statue of Laocoon and His Sons, which according to Glenn Most is symbolic of human suffering. Laocoon is a priest who warns the Trojans not to accept the Trojan Horse, and reveals it to be hollow when he throws a spear at it. He and his two sons are killed in great agony by sea serpents, presumably because the Gods want Troy to fall and Laocoon is punished for interfering (“Laocoons” 325-26). It is an interesting image considering possible parallels between the mansion scenes and the Trojan War. Major West is somewhat like Laocoon in that he sees Jim’s potential as a threat to British Empire and imperialism, and tries to kill him, just as Laocoon sees through the Trojan Horse. As a result, West and his “boys” are killed by Jim, who is very much becomes a Trojan horse himself, storming the mansion and waging war to recover the woman who was stolen (Selena/Helen of Troy). In general, bringing the apparently harmless Jim into the mansion results in death and destruction for the military brigade.
from them as their bodies fail, and in their visage the viewer is reminded of third world countries where the suffering of people who endure chemical and biological warfare are impassively ignored by imperialistic world powers and colonizers. In other words, this moment signals the way in which world powers and colonizers view those in the third world as sub-human and thus unworthy of empathy and aid, if indeed their suffering is noticed at all. Again, this shot of the dying infected is painfully slow, and emphasizes the violence that is inherent in both the inaction from those who could help, and the prolonged suffering of those who are animalized.

“**There is no Infection**: Rage, Survival, and the Un?-infected

To maintain hierarchies and to justify the exploitation of other living beings it is necessary to maintain a binary of “us” versus “them”, and zombies threaten the stability of such boundaries. As the living-ill as opposed to the living dead, the infected of *28 Days Later* trouble the distinction between “us” and “them” convincingly. Froula argues that the rhetoric of war is dependent upon this distinction, and that zombies in general negate this difference (196). I would agree with this contention since despite their rage, the infected live in a state of sickness and necessary pain that comes with burning, starving, vomiting blood, and wasting away. There is a hint of this pathos when in one moment, lying on the earth, Mailer reaches out to Jim in supplication before he is overtaken by rage again. Further emphasizing the instability of boundaries between the self and the other is the climactic scene of *28 Days Later*, which focuses on Jim’s chilling assault on the mansion and his almost seamless resemblance to the infected and has the effect of erasing claims to normative human being on the basis of logic and rationality; there is no way to eradicate rage. On the one hand, this final scene is problematic in that collapsing the distinction between Jim and the infected has the
effect of echoing Romero’s “they” are “us” claim, but I think it is useful to examine the parallels between Jim and the infected here for three reasons: first, it reveals the illusory anthropocentric bias that there is a core humanity to appeal to, whether this core is violent or not. Second, manipulation of speed and time in the climactic scene interrupts the logic that slowness—of thought and action on Jim’s part in particular—necessarily indicates an anthropocentric moral high ground that separates human animals from non-human animals on the basis of being careful and rational as opposed to violent and reactive. Finally, by representing the violence and reactivity of the infected and Jim as synonymous with animality, the scene opens a transitional space for me to explore not only how it collapses the ontological divide between human and non-human animal, but also how representations of the animal are problematically speciesist in an anthropocentric paradigm.

Up to the climactic scene in the film, Jim is characterized by his empathy, morality, family ties, and mild mannered nature in a way that is very much in line with the idealized fantasy figure of the human. For instance, the first infected he meets is a priest, who he is forced to strike in self-defense. Distraught that he has hit a man of the cloth, Jim backs away, repeating in distress that he “shouldn’t have done that.” His first move, despite being told that his loved ones are certainly dead, is to return to his parent’s house where he lovingly covers their dead bodies and emotionally descends into a memory of them while running his fingers over their photo and his mother’s recipe book. He is appalled by Selena’s cynical and cold perspective when she tells him that she would kill him in a heartbeat if he were to become infected, or leave behind anyone who slows her down. When Frank is infected, Jim is unable to kill him despite knowing that Frank will turn if the virus is allowed to run its course. Until he becomes aware that the “salvation” and “answer to infection” promised by
Major West insidiously means procreation though the ongoing rape of Selena and 12-year-old Hannah by 9 men, Jim is the epitome of benevolence. However, once he escapes the soldiers who attempt to execute him for his understandable horror at this idea, his loyalty to the two women invokes a rage and survival instinct that the viewer and Jim himself do not foresee, and these qualities are accompanied by the impression of Jim’s increased speed.

As I suggested earlier, there is an anthropocentric preoccupation in the film that moralizes slow, careful thought and action as anthropocentric; the filming techniques of the climactic scene gives the impression that Jim is speeding up and becoming like the infected, and like ‘an animal’ by extension. His similarity to the infected is signaled by the introduction of computer-enhanced digital effects that play with the visual impact of the scene: the splatterpunk effect of blood from hacked or vomiting infected, giving the fluids a graphic novel feel, are utilized for the torrential rain in the final scenes, which often strategically blur Jim’s features and suggest that who he has become is now equally blurred, an unknown quality. When he uses a siren to lure Private Davis (Sanjay Rambaruth) and Major West to the blockade where he lies in wait, Jim’s movements are lithe, soundless, and nearly imperceptible. The disjointed, shaky camera work and glimpses of Jim caught almost out of the corner of one’s eye are associated earlier in the film with the appearance and predatory movement of the infected. As pointed out by Heinze and Petzold, these filming

118 Peter Dendle ascribes this trend to the shifting relationship that the millennial generation—born in the MTV era and raised on video games, downloadable media and messaging—have to zombies. He notes the increased use of “‘Flo-Mo’ and ‘Bullet Time Cinematography’ (speed distortion effects used in post-production)” that signal an audience used to “visual fragmentation,” sudden transitions and cuts and the slowing and acceleration of scenes, which correspond to a multitasking generation with a short attention span. The frenetic energy of these effects rocket traditionally slow monsters from zero to sixty, including The Mummy (1999), Dawn of the Dead (2004), and I am Legend (2007) (“Zombie Movies” 179). In 28 Days Later, which Dendle does not mention despite being one of the ‘forerunning’ films with fast zombies, these effects serve to visually signal the behavior of Jim and the infected as interchangeable, and to echo the rapid fire images of human brutality seen in the film’s opening shot. I also think it is too simplistic to reduce these scenes based on the supposed short attention spans of millennials.
techniques apply to Jim as well as the infected (67), making the viewer uncomfortably aware that the protagonist has become nearly synonymous with the infected based on his speed. Now liminal, he straddles the no man’s land between the supposedly distinct states of being a slow, rational human versus a fast, irrational infected, and in effect demonstrates that this difference is only a matter of selective representation and is in fact a false dichotomy. He demonstrates that West may have been right to claim that there really is not an infection; there are only “people killing people” as a result of rage. In addition to speed, time is also important at this juncture: Jim successfully ambushes and kills Davis without hesitation and sadistically places him in the driver’s seat of his jeep to be discovered by West, and although his movements become fast, the scene is actually extended. The perspective of Jim biding his time but acting quickly and deliberately demonstrates that he is like the infected, but thinking slowly and methodically; he has a plan, and so morally distinguishing fast versus slow violence and action becomes even more difficult. In fact, Jim’s storming of the mansion uses the same framing techniques that highlight speed, and yet the sequence—at 10 minutes in length—is easily the longest and most elongated in the film. Speed and slowness are juxtaposed in the scene in such a way as to blur ontological boundaries between Jim and the infected, to build tension, and to emphasize those moments when slowness rather than speed encourages the viewer to engage with violence. This in turn has the effect of undermining the assumption that any line can exist related to speed, slowness, or other criteria, that can secure the human figure—so germane to anthropocentrism—from the non-human.

Jim’s rampage at the mansion begins with setting Private Mailer loose and impassively watching the melee from the windows outside as several soldiers are quickly transformed and violently killed in the kitchen; and while events unfold quickly, Jim’s
actions are measured and deliberate, not thoughtlessly reactive; there is no appeal to anthropocentrism based on slowness here. The use of disorienting camera angles, the rapid cutting of images, shots through blurred rain, and alternating shadow and light from the lightening outside emphasize the panic, confusion, and rapid-fire progression of events that lend both speed and intensity to the scene, but it is in interjected moments of slowness that we see the most violent moments. Significantly, Jim’s re-entry to the house is marked by the murder of Private Jones: as Jones runs for the front door after witnessing his friends infected and attacked, Jim runs him through with a bayonet. The camera cuts between close ups of both men’s faces over an un-necessarily extended period to register Jones’ shock and Jim’s obvious smugness. It is an important moment, particularly because it illustrates Jim’s new willingness not only to kill, but to do so in a way that is un-necessarily cruel and visceral.

The violent and callous representation of Jim here—couched in slowness, careful planning, and cruelty—is incompatible with anthropocentric biases about superiority of slowness and rationality, so that the speed of the scene becomes another way of unseating expectations about what behavior constitutes being human. The slowness of the moment encourages the viewer to acknowledge just how deliberately and mindfully violent Jim has become. Jones is the youngest and the most forgivable of the rogue soldiers: he is feminized as an inexperienced soldier and is first introduced in a pink apron as the house cook, a good natured young man seeking the approval of Major West and the others. More pointedly, he protests when Corporal Mitchell elects to execute Captain Farrell with a bayonet rather than shooting him, which would be quicker and more merciful. Recognizing the barbarism and

119 In “Necropolitics”, Mbembe discusses how innovations in the technologies of putting people to death aim at quickly disposing of large numbers of victims and civilizing the ways of killing, but he also argues that “another cultural sensibility emerges in which killing the enemy of the state is an extension of play. More intimate, lurid, and leisurely forms of cruelty appear” (158). Farrell is not only Mitchell’s superior, but in protesting West’s
disrespect of this act, Jones shoots the Captain before Mitchell can stab him, resulting in the argument that allows Jim to escape. Jim’s use of the bayonet to kill Jones recalls Mitchell’s intent to kill the innocent Farrell in the same manner, and with the same degree of apparent relish.

28 Days Later continues to draw parallels between the infected and uninfected as chaos reigns in the mansion: at times the viewer catches only glimpses of the infected and Jim running through the house, and it is often difficult to tell the infected and uninfected apart, even for the soldiers themselves. Jim is identifiable when he calls for Selena and Hannah while sprinting effortlessly through the house, but the purposefulness of his movement is reminiscent of the infected despite his more graceful progression: he is shirtless and bloodied after being beaten and newly escaped. Moreover, a shot of Jim rushing up a flight of stairs bellowing Hannah’s name against the blurred motion of passing balusters demonstrates a speed and drive similar to the infected that is highlighted when juxtaposed with Jim’s only other stair scene. In the stairwell of Frank and Hannah’s building, Jim needs to stop and rest, complains of a headache, and pleads with Selena to wait for him when infected break in. By the end of the film, Jim is fueled by loyalty, rage, vengeance, and survival, giving him the stamina and grace to jump walls, run across rooftops and up stairs with ease. Measured against the slowness of the former scene, Jim’s transformation and violence in the latter is enhanced. Boyle deliberately altered the frame rate of the camera for the final scenes and the infected attacks in general with erasing the bifurcation between infected and uninfected in mind: “the idea is that you can’t quite trust your usual sense of

plan to rebuild the human species using the bodies of Selena and Hannah he becomes such an enemy and is, therefore, deserving of such a cruel death as far as Mitchell is concerned.
judgment about perception, depth, and distance when dealing with the infected” (“28 Days Later: An Interview” qtd. in Hunter 80), and therefore they are harder to anticipate, react and respond to, let alone identify. The point here, however, is that Jim is not infected, and that he is represented in terms of his similitude with the infected. As such, he represents the permeability of the human figure, and the fact that how it is defined and understood depends in large part on how it is represented rather than on some claim of essential human being.

The climactic scene of the film is relentless in its assertion that humans can be represented as having a propensity for violence and cruelty as easily as they can be represented as the epitome of grace, reason, and benevolence when it culminates with what is, to my mind, the most difficult scene to watch due to its brutality: Jim’s murder of Corporal Mitchell, who is seen dragging Selena into an empty bedroom and planning to rape her and then take her elsewhere against her will. Jim lets Mailer exact vengeance on his former comrades, but reserves his personal vengeance for the Corporal. Jim takes the opportunity to punish Mitchell in particular for a number of offenses. Mitchell is established throughout the film as a cocky, arrogant, insensitive and vulgar soldier. It is Mitchell who expresses his excitement after an attack by the infected by making vulgar and sexual advances towards Selena; Mitchell who expresses anticipation and pleasure at the prospect of killing his superior (Farrell), and Mitchell who taunts Jim before his near execution, perhaps having noticed the developing romantic connection between he and Selena, with the assurance that “I’m going to have the black one, and I’m gonna make her squirm.” No wonder, then, that Jim’s attack is both personal and singular: he drops soundlessly from the ceiling, charges Mitchell, and proceeds to brutally smash his head against the wall as we see a close up of Jim’s bloody, screaming face. Finally, Jim throws Mitchell on the bed and
gouges out his eyes with both thumbs. As the musical score reaches a crescendo, the camera pans from Jim’s impassive face, down his taut arms, and unflinchingly to his thumbs, which are buried so deeply in Mitchell’s eyes while the man still screams that they are not visible. The blinding here seems to deliberately punish Mitchell for “looking” at Selena and Hannah the way he and the other men do: as objects for use and pleasure, and Jim makes him pay for his rape fantasy in a grisly reverse penetration. This is not a sudden and fast act of violence, and the film does not represent it as such; it is a slow, deliberate, elongated moment that is nearly unbearable in its grisly detail. This moment forces the viewer to engage—as in the scene where Selena butchers Mark—not with fast violence, but with slow violence. What is so frightening in this scene, for the viewer and for Selena, who stands poised and shaking, machete at the ready, is the horror of seeing what Jim is capable of and by terrifying extension what all people are capable of, whether infected or not. As Jim turns from Mitchell’s body to face Selena, only his silhouette, shoulders rising and falling with exertion, is visible in the dark. Selena is more than half convinced that Jim is infected, but hesitates just long enough to see that it is Jim, uninfected, standing before her. Although the tension ends with a tender moment in which Jim and Selena happily kiss, there is a brooding ambivalence in this resolution. Mistaking Jim for an infected biting Selena, Hannah interrupts the kiss by smashing a vase over Jim’s head, providing a moment of comic relief but also not permitting the viewer to forget the film’s central thesis: the lines between the infected and the human animal that experiences rage and enacts cruelty on its fellows are arbitrary. This is highlighted yet again when moments before the trio escape the mansion, one attempted and two successful murders are carried out: despite the untenable violence to this point, West hides in Frank’s cab and shoots Jim for killing all his men, after which
Hannah deliberately backs the cab into the mansion entrance, where Mailer extracts West from the backseat and kills him. As the three survivors speed away, Mailer haunts the colonial mansion filled with bodies, suggesting that the violence is still not over and likely never will be. Brown cynically claims in the context of warfare in the film and outside of it that “inhuman violence is the necessary part of any kind of allegiance or human formation” (134), but to the contrary, it appears in 28 Days Later that violence is very much a default for the human animal. As what it means to define the human continues to change, violence cannot be called human or inhuman with any degree of confidence, and the implication that violence is somehow the domain of the animal becomes contentious.

Jim’s dramatic shift can be understood through Mbembe’s theorization of “the logic of survival,” at the heart of which is terror and death. He reminds us that

The survivor is the one who has taken on a whole pack of enemies and managed not only to escape alive, but to kill his or her attackers. This is why, to a large extent, the lowest form of survival is killing. Canetti points out that in the logic of survival, ‘each man is the enemy of every other’. Even more radically, in the logic of survival one’s horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. (“Necropolitics” 173)

The viewer clearly sees this satisfaction in Jim particularly when he kills Jones and Mitchell, but also in the actions of the soldiers: their decision to kill Jim and Captain Farrell is based on the logic of biological imperative, via which they see the possession of Selena and Hannah as necessary for individual and species survival, particularly since after 20 days, nihilism about the future had driven some of the men to attempt suicide; they see Jim and Farrell as a threat to their own survival. What one can take from this is that the film engages
with a false logic of survival that not only justifies but endorses killing. Indeed, the viewer is predisposed to view Jim as righteous in taking vengeance on the soldiers and saving Selena and Hannah from a life of sexual servitude, and yet his actions and motivations are somewhat similar to their own. As Froula reminds us, “uninfected humans are as brutal and violent about satisfying their biological urges as the infected ones are” (“Prolepsis and the ‘War on Terror’” 203). As a result, definitive lines drawn between infected and uninfected on the basis of civility or reason as opposed to emotion and impulse are irreparably erased. In fact, the human animal is represented here as the ultimate scourge, but especially because it is defined in terms of animality. What is significant is not just the conflation of the infected and the uninfected, but the conflation of the infected/uninfected with the animal. What is at stake for the soldiers is not just the continuation of the species but the urge to experience sexual pleasure at the expense of their captives; what is at stake for West, who refuses to entertain the possibility that Britain has merely been quarantined, is a need to cling to empire and imperialism while gaining knowledge based on the neglect if not torture of the African-American body (Mailer). Couched in the rhetoric of ‘biological urges’, imperatives, and my own observation about the animalization of Mailer is the conflation of the human and the infected with the animal. In an anthropocentric context, it is the non-human animal that is spoken of in terms of biological instinct and ‘basic’ drives, so that the ultimate degeneration is implied by a transition from a rational human to a reactive animal; this is an implication troubled by the blurring of rational planning and reactive violence demonstrated by Jim, and an implication that I will continue to trouble in the following section.
Boyle’s underlying cynical thesis seems to be that Rage, although it does present as a mutation of highly virulent rabies, is already a part of contemporary human existence in industrialized societies. He ultimately contends that it is not something curable, but rather something that ‘infects’ everyone. Rage as an emotion is represented as being inherent in the film and thus does not require viral transmission, a fact which has dire repercussions for a species intent on defining itself in opposition to “animality,” by which I mean a representation of the animal as an enraged beast which is understood in terms of its difference from the rational human subject. In fact, many scholars such as Dendle and Vint have described zombie and human behavior alike in the genre as “animalistic,” particularly the fast zombie, whose qualities are described as predatory; like a beast. This contention seems to be supported by some of this figure’s defining characteristics: their red or ice-blue eyes resemble the eyes of wolves or other animals whose eyes glow red in the dark. They move lithely like jungle cats and large predators; they roar, growl, or chitter. All of this indicates a desire to read a bifurcation between the human and non-human animal as a way to reinforce speciesism, and again it comes back to a conflation of increased speed, violence, and animality. Vint argues that the “rapid and animal-like movements of the infected and the aesthetic of their dispatch” indulges a de-humanization of them and the survivors who kill them (“Abject Posthumanism” 137), but she does not thoroughly problematize the impact of describing the infected as exhibiting generalized ‘animal’ behavior in opposition to that of ‘rational’ humans. Dendle too claims that “zombies have become much more outwardly violent and animalistic, and this has also made them more predictable” (185), but he fails to
trouble what it might mean to label a zombie both violent and animalistic, and to question the humanist ideological bias inherent in such labeling.

To call someone or something animalistic suggests that the workings of the non-human animal are simplistic, defined by the negative characteristics that the human animal ascribes to them. By extension, non-human animals, the infected, and—by their abhorrent survival oriented behavior—the uninfected too, are subject to biopolitical governance that legitimates their “exclusion and abjection epitomized by Agamben’s *homo sacer*, the one who can be killed but not sacrificed because this figure is constituted only by the bare life of existence, not full human being” (Vint 134). What constitutes an ostensible “full-human being” is built on a legacy of classical humanism, at the heart of which are implicit assumptions about the subhuman status of women, ethnic others, and non-human animals, as well as the legacy of sovereignty—in terms of Foucault’s biopower: “the right to take life or let live” (*The History of Sexuality* 136)—that permeates all levels of *28 Days Later*. The obsession of the humanist project in the film may well be to deepen the illusory divide between the human and non-human animal, since the scientific investment of the film—never articulated but only implied—seems to be the harnessing of rage, perhaps for the purpose of bioweaponry but perhaps to eradicate rage from the human psyche in the pursuit of undisputed human exceptionalism. However, the folly of such harnessing or extrication is already undermined, given that the chimp in the Cambridge Primate Lab, and presumably all its companions, are implied as being infected with Rage via forced exposure to acts of human violence and atrocity from a host of unspecified locations on a number of television monitors. These acts of violence, and the trajectory of murder and brutality seen throughout
the film that echo historical and ongoing events of colonialism and imperialism, are not due to infection.

Theorists discussing *28 Days Later* invest analysis in imperialism, risk management, and the zombie without addressing the elephant in the room, the animal at the heart of zombie narratives. What does it mean, then, if we have to attribute aggressive behaviors not to non-human animals, but to ourselves as the film suggests? What does it mean if we accept that the ‘animal’ cannot be torn from the human? This is a significant question since the conflation of the zombie as violent other with the non-human animal is ubiquitous: in Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) a news report states that the zombies look like people and act like animals. In Yann Demange’s *Dead Set* (2008), in which the zombie apocalypse occurs in the midst of a parody *Big Brother* filming, one of the characters cynically says of the screaming fans, “that’s the public for you, innit? They’re all animals.” In *28 Days Later*, one of the smaller headlines on a newspaper detailing the infection and resulting exodus from Britain that Jim picks up reads “deadly animals”, as if to make the connection between zombies and animals explicit and in contrast to human being. Above all though, *28 Days Later* explicitly disavows the idea that humans are somehow above non-human animals: it is no coincidence that the first image of the film shows the excess of human brutality against one another but also against the non-human animals (chimps) who are subjected to torture in human run labs around the world. The exploitation of living beings depends on upholding distinctions between human and non-human animals, and between humans who consider their lives to be of more value than others. However, despite attempts to distance the human species from non-humans, the range of emotions and behaviors are experienced not on a binary scale but rather across a continuum. Wolfe elaborates that “the
animal has always been especially, frightfully nearby, always lying in wait at the very heart of the constitutive disavowals and self-constructing narratives enacted by that fantasy figure called ‘the human’” (*Animal Rites* 6). Nowhere is this clearer than when Jim acts according to survival in the mansion, but it is evident in Selena’s killing of Mark, the soldier’s plans for rebuilding Britain, and a host of other instances. It is also clear that the film plays upon the fear that such ostensibly ‘animal’ behavior exists in human animals as part of evolution. That said, it must be noted that Wolfe’s claim about the frightful animal in wait does not mention that the human’s self-constructing narratives depend on identifying strong familial and social bonding, empathy, and suffering as characteristic of the human animal alone, when those feelings and experiences are also at the heart of non-human animal lives. Part of what this means is that the rhetoric used to deny any common bond between humans and animals loses potency and legitimacy, and so too does the separation between colonizer and colonized. West and his soldiers view the infected as savages to be killed with impunity, and as Mbembe tells us, for conquerors “savage life is just another form of animal life, a horrifying experience, something alien, beyond imagination or comprehension”, and this difference between savages and human beings is located in “the fear that [savages] behave like a part of nature, that they treat nature as their undisputed master” (163). Being an animal is not just undesirable but terrifying for West and his men, and they are determined not to find pastoral refuge or a new start, but to rebuild civilization and negate nature and their own impulses through military procedure, which fails spectacularly. The ideological bias towards human exceptionalism and the lesser value of non-human life is implicit in some of the exchanges between the men. Most notably, Farrell unbelievingly asks Mitchell, who plans to stab him with a bayonet, if he will “stick him like a dog”. That is, without any respect for his status not
just as a Captain, but as a human being. Of course, West and his Brigade have the luxury of deciding who or what constitutes human life and what subsequent treatment they will receive based on that. Part of what *28 Days Later* reveals is the inability to define the human in opposition to the animal, and thus it reveals the human as an invasive species that, having constructed an ontological hierarchy stacked in its own favor, pretends to the illusion of a throne from which it rules over all other species.

The similarities that emerge as a result of evolution rather than the differences between the human and non-human animal are also visually articulated when Jim wakes up in the hospital surrounded by monitors. The close ups of the sunlight hitting his eye and lashes, his arms and legs, cannot help but illuminate all his body hair. An overhead establishing shot reveals Jim to be unclothed on his hospital bed, and the image parallels Jim with the chimpanzee in the research facility by emphasizing their anatomical and situational resemblance. To be clear, I am not arguing that Jim and the Chimp are equated in that they both appear to be naked; as Derrida argues, a principle difference between man [*sic*] and animal is nudity: humankind is the only species that has thought to dress itself. The animal “is not naked because it is naked. It doesn’t feel its own nudity. There is no nudity ‘in nature’” (“The Animal that Therefore I am (More to Follow)” 5). Rather, the significance of this moment is that Jim is evolutionarily similar to the Chimp by way of anatomy and circumstance. Like the Chimp, Jim is unwillingly forced to witness horrifying human cruelty, which he then internalizes himself. It is fitting that the viewer is introduced to Jim’s unclothed form in a manner that is likewise, if only briefly, naturalized in that he too does not feel his own nudity. This moment subtly suggests not the differences between human and non-human animals, but the likenesses. Perhaps more importantly, rather than re-establish the
political, emotional, and intellectual superiority of humans, the representation of non-human animals in the film indicates a radical rethinking and inversion of these qualities: it is the chimpanzees who are the primary victims of the film; the family of horses running free on the fields are uninfected, the birds still fly in the air despite the chaos on the ground and the rats actually run from rage infected humans, understanding the threat of these pathological human animals. Non-human life in the film is represented not as violent, but as devoid of rage and aggression and victimized by the human animal’s meddling. Such a representation only highlights the contrasting and often intentional violence of the human animal, so there is a tension in the film between showing the evolutionary continuum between human and non-human animals, but also in suggesting that in comparison it is humans that have the capacity to act intentionally aggressive with no other motive than to hurt other beings. The representation of the human subject approaches dissolution, or at the very least a fall from grace. For the ancient Greeks, grace was a quality that separated “the mere living of zoe from the fully human existence of bios, marking those humans who had sufficiently separated themselves from the animal within” (Vint 137), but clearly in 28 Days Later such a separation is not possible, and just perhaps, it would result in the human animal as being more and not less violent. Moreover, if separation from the animal is a prerequisite for full human being, the implication is that the human truly is a fantasy figure. Increasingly, there are no grounds for the demarcation of the animal and the human that results in the idea that humans are somehow unique. Rather, an acceptance of their relatedness is a far more productive way to view living beings. As Darwin succinctly put it, “when I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to me to become
ennobled” (“on the Geological Succession” 306), particularly since in Darwin’s view, natural selection would ensure that “all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection” (307). In other words, Darwin recognized an interconnectivity between beings that is always a work in progress rather than based on the achievements of an ostensibly and independently created human species. Most of the characters in 28 Days Later demonstrate a wide spectrum of behaviors and emotions that oscillate inside and outside those expected and required of the human. If this oscillation means that the human then becomes a non-subject and a non-object, it perhaps invokes posthumanism, especially if, as Lauro and Embry argue, the posthuman can only be reached after the death of the subject (“A Zombie Manifesto” 87), once the boundaries of a dialectical model of subject and object are transgressed.

One other possible reading of the representation of animals in the film is that the eradication of the human animal is a planetary autoimmune response to our overpopulation and the endless and unsustainable cycle of consumption that defines human life. The endless and damaging consumption of planetary resources by humans is allegorized by the zombies that eat everything living in The Walking Dead 2010-, as well as the lab animals that are consumed or zombified by humans—such as the zombified crows and Dobermans that I term zominals—in Resident Evil. As Farrell muses at the dinner table in 28 Days Later, “when you think about it, we, I mean man, has only been around for a few blinks of an eye. So if the infection wipes us all out, that is a return to normality.” The death of the human would, therefore, restore the ecological balance, which might explain why no other animals in 28 Days Later seem to be infected, and why similarly in Dawn of the Dead (2004), the dog Chips is sent to carry food from one building to another without zombies paying him any
attention. It is the human animal that endlessly consumes, and perhaps it is the human animal alone in zombie film that must be destroyed.

**Hopeful Hopelessness and Uneasy Endings**

Even in the pastoral and apparently hopeful ending of the film, seeds of warning and apprehension about humanism and violence are already germinating. In the official ending, 28 days after Jim is shot, he, Selena, and Hannah are revealed to be living in a cottage that is nestled between rolling green hills in the picturesque Lake District. By making giant letters of fabric that spell “H.E.L.L.O”, they finally catch the attention of a fighter jet and are presumably rescued. Brown reads this as an ultimately positive ending, which is understandable since as Heinze and Petzold point out, this final scene is the only one produced on “35mm film as opposed to digital consumer cameras, giving the pastoral setting a sense of sharper, clearer reality, as if waking from a nightmare” (65). It hearkens back to earlier moments of exodus from London in the film, in which Jim, Selena, Hannah and Frank drive past fields of bright flowers with the quality of an oil painting thanks to digital enhancement and the oversaturation of their colour, lazily turning wind turbines in green fields, and find overnight shelter in ruins that sit in a field of lush green, water, and gently rolling fog. There is a sense that this return to a pastoral England will rejuvenate and restore their lives, but the exodus still leads the group to the horrors of militarized life and biological urges in the mansion, suggesting that there is no escape to be found from these conditions. Similarly, the appearance of the fighter jet at the end of the film confirms Farrell’s earlier hypothesis that the world has not in fact ended; Britain has been quarantined and the rest of the world is continuing on as normal. It appears to be a saving grace that will bring the three survivors back to civilization, but this ‘happy ending’ is premature. Jim’s dream sequence in
cottage, which frames the final scene, jarringly cuts from images of his resuscitation to the field with his message, “Hello”, already arranged on the topography. It is significant that they use the greeting “Hello” rather than the expected “Help”, because Jim’s greeting flickers between completion and incompletion to reveal the word “Hell,” and thus it becomes a subtle portent of the horror Jim’s greeting has provoked time and time again. The result of using this greeting is known a priori, since repeatedly in the film Jim calls “Hello” and is attacked by the infected without fail. As Carroll elaborates, the message indicates that “the second time the characters call upon military saviors will be like the first. The events of the sequel, *28 Weeks Later*, in which occupying US troops kill the healthy and the infected alike to maintain quarantine, are already implicit in *28 Days Later*. Salvation is not here” (55). The sequel positions the US in the role of failed savior and world police as it endeavors to re-populate the UK with refugees from the original pandemic, yet the presence of U.S. troops only makes matters worse. In this scene then, we are reminded that there is no outside to which the survivors can escape, especially since the film has established all too well that military response to risk management and threat and the re-establishment of the status quo involves returning to the internalized anthropocentric doctrine of racism, sexism, speciesism, and the violence that accompanies it. Heinze and Petzold too recognize the fighter plane as being ominously emblematic of war and militarism (66).

Another problem raised by the theatrical ending is the re-establishment of a tradition nuclear family unit, despite the lack of blood ties. Jim becomes a father figure for Hannah, an assumed partner for Selena, and so despite the film’s attempt “to distance itself from heteronormativity, patriarchy, and the nuclear family” (Carroll 53) it actually re-inscribes them here and romanticizes the family unit throughout as Jim has a literally “glowing”
memory of his dead parents or watches an uninfected family of horses run together (54). The four horses are composed of two adults and two children, two black and two white, paralleling the genetically diverse formed family of Jim and Hannah (one a child, and one childlike), and Selena and Frank (two responsible and pragmatic adults). This simplification of the family unit and the heterosexual romantic coupling as somehow stable and redemptive is rather disappointing. When Mark is killed, Selena scathingly mocks the expectations of western culture and Hollywood film in particular when she asks Jim, “Do you have any plans? Do you want us to find a cure, or just fall in love and fuck?” She has no illusions about what is expected, and yet she and Jim presumably do fall in love and become intimate. In the mansion scene and by end of the film, Selena and Hannah are re-relegated to the role of helpless women under imperialistic, patriarchal and heteronormative ideology. In the mansion, before Mailer’s attack, they are both demure: hands folded in their laps, legs chastely crossed, and dressed in seductive red for their captors and would be rapists. Hannah and Selena resemble Victorian ladies and occupy the disenfranchised political space as non-persons. This is in startling contrast to the self-sufficient, strong, and capable women they have been all along: Hannah proves to be outspoken: at 14 she convinces Jim, Selena and her father not only that they all need each other, but that they cannot stay in the apartment complex and die. She is also a skillful and mechanically inclined driver who changes the tire on her father’s cab before the infected can attack, and is resilient in the face of her father’s death. Selena too is a survivor with useful skills as a pharmacist, and an unflinching ability to protect herself. In the climactic scene of the film, she and Hannah have been reduced to hollow clichés by their captors, their humanity stripped as they are objectified in the interest of patriarchal and militaristic interests, who must now suddenly be saved by Jim. Boyle and
MacDonald were keenly aware of the problems the ending poses, and I want to point out here that the theatrical ending is not the ending that the director and producer favored: in an alternate ending available on the DVD, the film ends with Jim dying in a hospital room after being shot by West as Selena and Hannah work desperately to save him. The two women walk out of the hospital, guns in hand, as the doors swing shut and leave the viewer behind in blackness. This ending validates Selena’s earlier disdain for the expected and endlessly repeated heterosexual narrative and is positive in the sense that the women do not fall into the representational trappings of what it means to be feminine; they bravely walk into the world outside. However, this ending tested terribly for test audiences, who felt the ending was too bleak and that the women were walking to certain death (*DVD Commentary*).

The end of the film is steeped in uncertainty and conflicting ideological allegiances, but the rejection of the second ending reveals an audience uncomfortable with unknowable and uncertain futures, potential risks from terrorism, pandemic, and bioweaponry, and a state of being where institutions of family, church, military, and government cannot provide answers or protection. Underscoring all of this is an anxiety that we continue to live in a world where the limits of the human determine whose lives matter and whose lives do not, and thus who has the most to fear from being omitted from protective measures on the one hand, and animalized on the other. All the endings to some extent establish the continuity of human cruelty and suffering and call the exceptionalism of the human animal, and the normative human figure, into question. The theatrical ending also provides a final moment in which to consider speed: while the final, pastoral scene—and presumably the reintegration into a society ‘safe’ from Rage—is informed by recovery, leisure, and slowness, that same slowness invites violence to again become invisible. Without the obvious visible intensity of
violence indicated by speed in the film, Jim, Hannah and Selena do not recognize the slower, more insidious violence of normalized sexism, racism, and speciesism that still exists in the world at large. It is worth noting that there is an obvious tension in this scene between slow and fast violence: the survivors also fail to recognize the implications of the fighter jet, which simultaneously signals that help is on the way, but also signifies the fast violence of imperialism, warfare, and sudden bombing that are part of the world they are returning to. By turns then, speed is a complex figure in the film that accelerates and decelerates in ways that prompt us to question how we understand violence, sublimate the other and by extension the ‘animal’ to a fantasy figure of the human that does not hold, and to ultimately explore how speed in zombie film reveals the limits of the human figure. Moreover, what becomes clear despite the persistent inclination of zombie films to attempt a reification of anthropocentrism and the figure of the human is that the zombie figure has consistently evolved to keep pace with the changes set in motion during the Anthropocene Age. Again, humans as a species have irrevocably—and relatively quickly—altered the Earth’s geography, environment, ecology, and so on, even as human culture, philosophy, and innovations have continued to develop. This is to say that although Romero’s “they” are “us” argument persists in the genre of zombie horror film, the still-developing trajectory of the zombie figure from folkloric to slow, from slow to mutating, from mutating to fast, and so on attests not to ontological fixity—a necessary requirement for anthropocentrism and the figure of the human—but to constant ontological fluidity—the hallmark of posthumanism. Rather than securing ontology, the zombie figure continues to evolve in tandem with the human figure and in turn suggests the impossibility of reifying either one.
Chapter 6 Conclusion: Vexed Eschatologies

*Giles:* “It’s the end of the world.” *Xander and Willow:* “Again?!”

- “Doomed.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

> “Whoever takes on the apocalyptic tone comes to signify to, if not tell, you something. What? The truth, of course, and to signify to you that it reveals the truth to you; the tone is the revelator of some unveiling in process. Unveiling or truth, apophantics of the imminence of the end, of whatever returns at the limit, at the end of the world.”

–Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy.”

When Derrida writes of the complexities of translating “apocalypse” from the Hebrew *gala*, he prefaces his discussion by claiming that the histories or enigmas involved are “without solution or conclusion” and so to some extent, one might say that entanglement, without the possibility of resolution, is paradoxically the ‘end’ goal of considering endings (“Of An Apocalyptic Tone” 63). The same is true of this conclusion, which in due course will reveal itself to be similarly knotted in the problem of endings that are uneasy, unresolved, and in a word, vexed. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes the word ‘conclusion’ thusly: as “the end, close, finish, termination”; alternatively as a “final result” or “outcome” of a speech or writing. These definitions deceptively suggest that writing any conclusion should ideally bring about some sense of closure and finality; a perfectly penned final word after which I could finish this project and bring the reader to a neatly packaged and definitive outcome. As the steady stream of cinematic apocalypse surely demonstrates, there is actually no end in sight, no end to ending, and so I must be content to settle for an open-ended finality; one that brings some points to a temporary resolution yet necessarily anticipates that there is always some other deferrable end that is yet to come, both because as an exploratory study this thesis opens new pathways of enquiry for me rather than exhausting them, and because zombie films and television shows continue to be produced. Like the undead themselves, these productions return interminably. It is a reasonable assumption that
the growing body of criticism on the zombie sub-genre will expand exponentially in line with new films and what they contribute, from myself as well as others. The end of this project is imminent, and yet I write knowing that when I am finished I have in no way arrived at the end; the end, like the posthuman, is still coming. As Derrida claims, insofar as it “resounds with a certain tone” that “is in itself the apocalypse of the apocalypse” rather than simply announcing the apocalypse, “‘Come’ is apocalyptic” (94). With this idea of things to come in mind, I have experienced increasing discomfort with the ways in which scholars I have consulted and cited throughout this work draw their own readings to a close—an impossible task that is nevertheless assumed and required—as if scholars in the field were all systematically sealing the heavy doors of many theoretical crypts and putting a discourse of the zombie to some final rest. This is, as I have argued in relation to Romero’s zombies and the ongoing debates about whether zombies can or should be fast or slow, the trap of essentializing a figure that has been changing since it left its folkloric roots in the Caribbean to colonize horror film in North America in the 1930s. In her own engagement with apocalypse, Tina Pippin expounds the problem of reaching an end when she claims that “in every reading I do of the biblical apocalyptic I desire a more stable text; every new reading disrupts the previous reading, and on and on” (“Prequel, or Preface” xi). All of this is to say that no writer is equal to the task of successfully closing a work or of having the final word on zombies. To be sure, one of the great appeals of the horrific zombie apocalypse for me is its ability to remain unstable in its conclusions; to shake the ground under the feet of theoretical and ontological certainty. Indeed, to find some definitive conclusion about the zombie, its ontology, and its genre seems at once reductive and impossible. Defined by a rejection of finitude as well as the biological rhythms that constitute and maintain life—
specifically the return of the dead—the zombie apocalypse is an event that paradoxically promises and warns of the end of human life in general, and potentially the end of the planet itself. Derrida tells us “the end approaches, but the apocalypse is long-lived. The question remains and comes back: what can be the limits of a demystification?” (89) The end is always imminent but never here; warnings about the final judgment are announced and then deferred to some new, inevitable date. Derrida might well have been questioning the limits of a zombie apocalypse, since what returns at the limit and the end of the world in my work is the zombie. How indeed can one hope to find and articulate demystification when discussing a figure that itself keeps coming back? The zombie—the very epitome of death that refuses to die, the cadaver that refuses to lie still and instead returns again and again—places the idea of resolution, finality, closure and ending under duress; the sealed crypts of any reading that claims to be conclusive is ruptured by inevitable return. The end of this dissertation, the endings—open, closed, and un-resolved alike—of zombie films, the supposed end of the human that is heralded by the posthuman, the end of the world promised and warned by ongoing depictions of apocalypse, and the end of traumatic, horrific, historical events such as 9/11 are depicted as having happened, as happening, as something that will echo into future generations to happen again. One might yearn for the event to end, and yet it never does, just as the undead never stay buried.

120 Since 1999, some of the various predictions about the end of the world include the Y2K or Millennium bug, which supposedly would cause massive global power failure and software/hardware crashes with chaotic results for banks and government records; Christian Radio broadcaster Harold Camping’s assertion that Christ would return to Earth for the rapture on May 21, 2011; and the 2012 phenomenon which, based on the Mesoamerican calendar, supposedly identified December 21, 2012 as the day the world would end. In 2009, the disaster film 2012 dramatized the end of days. See “Harold Camping: Doomsday Prophet Wrong Again,” and Roach.

121 Here I am thinking of Derrida’s “Autoimmunity” and his assertion, which arises in various incarnations in the chapters of this thesis, that 9/11 is an event that allows no finality or mourning when “Traumatism is produced by the future, by the to come, by the threat of the worst to come, rather than by an aggression that is ‘over and done with’” (97).
The apocalypse might be supposed to herald finality; “the eschatological tells the *eschaton*, the end, or rather the extreme, the limit, the term, the last, what comes in *extremis* to close a history, a genealogy, or very simply a countable series” (Derrida 68), and yet, the zombie apocalypse and genre itself offers no closure. One might consider any number of zombie films in light of this observation as auteurs approach representations of some final limit for the world and for the human species. In his analysis of the un-dead, for instance, Gregory A. Waller offers some observations on strategies of closure in such narratives and argues that in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), viewers are presented with a series of eschatologies, including the end of the night, Ben’s shooting, and the subsequent images of the bonfire of corpses to which his body is added. What is revealed, for Waller, is the burden of the film’s irony, bleakness, and futility, and our need to see what happens and to know the truth is a price viewers pay: “by leading us past this series of potential endings until we finally stop with the bonfire, Romero demands that we see his film through, beyond the credit sequence and beyond any conventional expectations about where it ought to end” (“Resolution, Violence, Survival” 332). Waller implies that where it ought to end is on a moment that in a Hollywood film might restore order, a sense of hope, and a safe, conservative and de-politicized return to normality: a dawning day with lawmen regaining control over the zombie threat, perhaps, and certainly before the murder of the film’s last survivor. More notably, I would add, is that what constitutes the return of conservative normality—what comes at the limit of the film’s end—is a continued anthropocentrism based on the fantasy figure of the human: supposedly heroic white men burning bodies and killing the single African-American character on sight. Significantly then, there is a typical return to order that is disturbingly signaled by the animalization of African-Americans, whose lives
matter less than those of Caucasian people and which are as disposable as zombies. Romero’s film demonstrates the limit of the human figure, but certainly not that it can easily be cast aside. *Resident Evil* (2002) also offers the viewer a number of eschatological possibilities. If one were to see only the first film, they would be left with an image of Alice, the sole survivor of the Hive, emerging onto a decimated downtown street in Raccoon City, which is devoid both of the living and the undead. The subtext is that the entire world has been destroyed; the end has arrived, humanity has irrevocably fallen, and Alice too, presumably, will die. In the first film, Anderson moves viewers within touching distance of the tangible body under the sheet that they are led to feel with tentative fingers. This inevitable, tangible death, as David Pagano observes, “marks the absolute end of something—variously describable as life, consciousness, personality, will, agency, and so forth” (78). And yet, the biblical understanding of John’s apocalypse tells of a final judgment after which souls will move to heaven, purgatory, or hell. This particular Judeo-Christian apocalyptic narrative thus provides a loophole against the unimaginable nothingness of non-existence. Here, too, is a deferral and a denial of mortality. The state of zombification itself—insofar as it involves carrying on in a sort of un-death, absorbing life (“R” attains the memories of a victim he eats and becomes living again in *Warm Bodies* (2013), for example), or ongoing mutation (*Resident Evil Franchise* (2002-2016))—disallows or at least complicates the end of life.

If ontological lines are constantly blurred: between life and death, human and non-human animal, human and zombie, then it must be acknowledged that perhaps we have never been and can never be “human”; at least not in the way that the term has been understood in terms of whiteness, maleness, ableism, heterosexuality, and the ability to have rights and
hold property. The reality of the body under the sheet—the culmination of mortal fears—stages our individual deaths, and the serious zombie film approaches that limit: in Zack Snyder’s *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), viewers are left with video footage of the survivors on a boat, and their final footage is of a horde of zombies attacking when they finally dock in desperation. As in *Resident Evil* (2002), viewers are led to believe that the survivors will all die, but they do not get to witness and confirm this because the film that the survivors are shooting—the final documentation of their story—ends prematurely. In *Diary of the Dead* (2008), as viewers watch the footage of events contextualized by Debra’s haunted voiceover, it is implied that she, Tony, and Dr. Maxwell may also already be dead, living on only as spectral images on a computer screen, seduced by and incorporated into the violence of apocalyptic discourse and belaying the end as long as there is someone to watch. In these particular film instances and more besides, the viewer is close enough to touch the question of what it would really mean for their individual selves to ‘end,’ see beyond the insubstantial veil of the winding shroud, but at that limit, the moment when they might be shown that end, zombie films flinch, shy away, and encourage viewers to imagine a finality that in some sense is beyond the limits of imagination. As a result, they are left with unsatisfactory open endings that resist the closure of a conventional narrative. While this thematic move does not solely belong to the zombie sub-genre, open, uneasy, violent, cynical and apocalyptic endings do constitute its basic criteria in a way that I contend is not seen to the same extent in other genres and even in other horror sub-genres. Thus, it is a sub-genre in particular—keeping in mind that the focus here is not the zomedy but the horrific zombie film—that invests itself in preventing reassuring comfortable endings, at which point humanity would typically prevail in other genres, full-stop, no questions asked.
In zombie films, where the human does prevail—in WWZ (2013) for instance, or 28 Days Later (2002)—viewers are given to understand that there is a problematic normalizing of the fantasy figure of the human that allows the dehumanization of others, a way of returning to normalcy that is more discomforting than reassuring. To recapitulate some other examples of vexed endings, 28 Days Later (2002) supplies two alternative endings in addition to the theatrical ending, which secures the safety of Jim, Selena, and Hannah—the perseverance of civilization, heterosexual relationships and the nuclear family structure is reinforced as the three are spotted by a military jet. Disturbingly, the jet also suggests that the empire of the United Kingdom perseveres in the form of the nation state’s military, which remains despite the disavowal and destructions of Major West’s brigade at the climax of the film. Despite the fact that this ending was not the first choice of the director but was the most hopeful and commercially viable, it remains fraught and uneasy, tainted by Jim’s dream of rescue in which he sees the ominous word “Hell” rather than the greeting “Hello” spread out along the rolling green hillside. Metaphysically, “hell” suggests that the rescue and rehabilitation into the uninfected world outside Britain that Jim expects will manifest as a worse post-apocalyptic “afterlife” than the harsh reality he has survived. In other words, there is no place to escape to. The rescue by military personnel after the horror Jim, Selena, and Hannah have already endured following their ‘rescue’ by Major West’s military brigade leaves as much room for despair as it does for hope in that it warns history will repeat itself; Jim, Selena and Hannah are not being saved so much as they are being reintegrated into a
world with the same anthropocentric ideology that legitimated their dehumanization.\textsuperscript{122} The other endings are increasingly bleak, and in both, Jim dies.

The eschatologies I have discussed offer no stability or re-assurance and call to mind the Möbius Strip: there is no outside or inside to escape to, particularly when as Morton explains, we inhabit a charnel ground rather than a world. In other words, one might prefer to see or represent the world as an aesthetic construct that offers supposedly safe places one can go in order to escape and ignore danger, stress, and other people, but this is an illusion: the pastoral Lake District in \textit{28 Days Later} is a case in point. Morton notes that how one sees the world—and to what degree of accuracy one sees it—impacts how one lives upon the Earth; the reality is a wasteland of ecological suffering that our species can no longer afford to ignore because we live in it. To my mind, an anthropocentric view of the world distracts from the reality of Morton’s charnel ground: that humans have an unexamined relationship to others—especially non-human animals—but also those who are defined as sub-human or non-human based on gender or ethnicity. The result of standing in the charnel ground—of examining these unexamined relationships—is to really see that the ongoing, unsustainable and unjustifiable violence against others and against the planet is built upon the fantasy figure of the human, and a subsequent human fantasy of the world, that is disingenuous at best and dangerous at worst. In dramatizing and allegorizing what the charnel ground might actually look like and how it highlights anthropocentrism and the limits of the human figure,

\textsuperscript{122} In the sequel, \textit{28 Weeks Later} (2007), the viewer is informed in passing that horrifyingly, Jim—whose life is determined to be of lesser value than the hyper-masculine British military men who attempted to kill him and rape his companions—has been tried and executed by the military for killing West’s men in order to save himself, Selena, and Hannah. Given the complex and violent history between Britain and Ireland (Jim is Irish), there are historical resonances for the way he is dehumanized by the British military. His execution also suggests that the dehumanization, abuse, and sexual slavery of women and young girls is a negligible crime if a crime at all in the outside world. Thus, there is nothing in the film to suggest that a return to an anthropocentric civilization is in any way a happy ending.
apocalyptic zombie films weave their intellectual ambitions with those of a critical posthumanism that theorizes the world and its end. The varying image of the ouroboros—an ancient image of a snake eating its own tail—aptly signifies the cannibalistic and cyclical nature of zombie films, the zombies in them that endlessly consume, and the people and planet that are in turn endlessly consumed. The beginning marks the end and vice versa on a continuous loop, and like the return of the repressed, the dead always return in changing incarnations.

This notion of approaching the limit but being unable to come to a close also plays itself out in the Resident Evil franchise across five films, during the course of which we are offered the open ending of each film and a new eschatology to accept or reject. Apocalypse (2004) and Extinction (2007) both imply a definitive end, but in the former, the apocalypse actually marks the end of Raccoon City; in the latter, the majority of humans, and the planet, are dead. The third film envisions the end of life on Earth and the end of humans—but for a handful of survivors—and yet the series itself continues to withhold an end, pushing it farther and farther into some unknown future. In Retribution, the final film in the series to date, protagonist Alice stands strong atop the White House with Washington burning all around her, ready still to fight to some indeterminate end. The endings of films themselves deny closure, but as Resident Evil implies, the stories themselves are prone to serialization that also resists conclusion, synthesis and simplicity. In Chapter 4, I suggested that the final scene

---

123 Implicit here is a metaphor for consumer society that consumes not just goods but environmental resources—certainly, films like Romero’s Dawn of the Dead (1978), which takes place at a mall, draw specific attention to obsession with consumption—but given the sub-genre’s recent focus on mutation and with that, the destabilization of the human figure, this is not to suggest that consumption is even close to being all the sub-genre is concerned with.

124 Of course, deferring the end of a series in this context is in part a byproduct of a desire to continue to capitalize on a popular film franchise, but I do not want to suggest that this is the only factor here.
of this film is one that alludes to ambivalence about the human subject if we are to interpret Alice as a posthuman figure who paradoxically signals the fragility of the figure of the human while at the same time she seems to be a replacement and redefinition of that figure. Like the end of the film itself, this tension is unresolved.

In theorizing the future of the zombie in popular culture, Bishop predicts that the ongoing re-animation of the zombie sub-genre will have a bright future in either nostalgic “old school” slow zombies or following the lead of Danny Boyle’s infected, they will become faster and inhabit scenarios of infection and violence. Overall, he predicts that serialization in video games, on television, and in graphic novels is the way of the future (“Conclusion” The Future Shock” 197-198). I would add that there are no signs of the zombie fading from film culture or television as well, considering newly minted titles like television series *Z Nation* (2014-). Serialization is already observable in films like the ongoing *Resident Evil* and *28 Days Later*, but has also made the transition between media via the popular graphic novel turned television series *The Walking Dead*. While serialization across genres and in horror genres in particular is not new, the current cultural moment marks the first time zombies—their narratives defined by bleak apocalyptic endings—have become episodic week by week and seasonally year by year; October 2014 marked the fifth season of the show and season six has been confirmed. Despite the fact that the series’ trajectory is already post-apocalyptic—the end has paradoxically come and gone for the majority of the world—viewers experience the deferred fate of the survivors episode by episode, season by season, and the deferred end of the show itself. In effect, the apocalypse is present, but drawn out indefinitely. As Tina Pippin writes, “every apocalypse is a sequel. A sequel is a work which follows another work and can be complete in itself and seen in relation to the former
and what follows it. The story becomes the never-ending story, in ever evolving renditions” ("Introduction: Apocalypse as Sequel" 1), and so not only does the story of apocalypse evolve, but it also promises yet another end to come. In the many remakes of Romero’s films and the sequels to many others, zombie narratives continue to enthrall audiences, especially in America. I will return to this shortly, but first I want to acknowledge the curious way in which, in addition to serialization, the zombie film subgenre sometimes perpetuates itself by coming full-circle; attempting to close its narrative structure by returning to an arbitrary beginning.

In the post-apocalyptic world of Resident Evil: Retribution, we discover, as Derrida suggests in “Of an Apocalyptic Tone,” that the end has come, the end is still coming, we are still waiting. Resident Evil 6: The Final Chapter is expected in 2016 and calls to mind that other ‘final chapter’, “Revelations,” and it will be interesting to see how the film attempts to finally bring closure to a narrative in which the final scene illustrates a charnel ground of smoke, fire, mutations and monsters juxtaposed against only a few living subjects. As I have already argued, I hesitate to trust in the validity of anything that calls itself a ‘final chapter.’ Interestingly, the plot of the final film itself is attempting—to fall back on a simple rhetorical strategy in basic essay writing—to close by return. The characters from the final film return to the Hive, the set of the first film, to stop the Red Queen from destroying all humans. This turn of phrase is fitting as it seems to me that the horror genre, the zombie-subgenre, and this—or any thesis—can only conclude or close by returning in some way to the beginning. Closing by return suggests a cycle, a circle, and the ouroboros, all of which stress the ambiguity, fluidity and instability of beginnings as well as endings so apropos of the revenant.
For Romero, closing by return is an ideal strategy: again, Diary is a re-telling of the early days of the zombie invasion set in the digital age, but mirrors the conventions and even the form—a low budget horror film by an in-experienced director—of Night of the Living Dead. In Land, the film opens with some of the original radio reports in Night and uses black and white footage and the old Universal Studios logo in an effort to make the film seem as if it were set in the past. Cycling back to his original film, its historical moment, and the conventions in narrative and form that he started with, Romero directs us back to the late 1960s and the context of the Vietnam War and missing soldiers, the Civil Rights Movement, and the experience of trauma and loss in the United States. These associations resonate in Land of the Dead, which very blatantly critiques the war in Iraq, the Bush administration represented by the oligarchy in Fiddler’s Green, and social and racial stratification in the United States. In the close by return, then, we are invited to see the cyclical nature of violence and terror, how the past is infused by the present and vice versa, and to have intertextual moments resonate between zombie films made before and after the event of 9/11. Highlighted in all these films is the underlying persistence of anthropocentrism that upholds a fantasy figure of the human and in turn enables dehumanization within this fantasy framework: of soldiers, ethnic minorities, women, animals, and so on. Again and again at the apocalypse, one is prompted to consider that this process of dehumanization is ongoing but is also pushing at some limit, some recognition that the human is an ideological construct and that it does not hold. One is also invited to recognize that returning to an arbitrary beginning in order to close it in a narrative actually does not suggest closure at all. This leaves me to

125 Romero claims that an antiquated feel was the goal of the film’s opening sequence. See DVD special feature, “Undead Again: The Making of Land of the Dead.”
suggest that like me, writers and auteurs of zombie television and films are themselves grappling with this question of how to end the un-endable, the interminable.

The notion that closing a narrative by return to an arbitrary beginning gives me pause to wonder at the extent to which the practice of creating un-endable endings produces a continued desire for endings in viewers of zombie film. These viewers watch a television show like *The Walking Dead* with the awareness that zombie films of a similar tone almost certainly close with the death of all human survivors and without any redeemable hope; they may well anticipate the conventional end of the series, even desire to see it, and simultaneously resist its long delayed but inevitable end. It seems to me that part of the appeal of the zombie apocalypse is the echoed tension here: if one both fears and desires finitude, the un-dead zombie figure embodies the tension between the feared (and desired) end, and the feared (and desired) consequences of continuing on when doing so might not look as appealing as one imagined. Of course, as Castricano points out in regards to the theme of the living-dead, “[w]hat returns, however, is always linked to desire, which is what Derrida means when he says that the crypt is ‘the vault of desire’” (“The First Partition” 9).

On the one hand, it is obvious that the deferral of filmic endings and serialization has a commercial interest in maintaining viewer desire—and indeed, as Castricano observes, revenance recalls revenue and revenir “from the French to come back or to amount to and thus to the notion of (financial) ‘return(s)’” (9)—but on the other hand, the living dead revenant asks us to consider what payment is being exacted from the living and in what form of currency. What is being inherited or passed down that resists being put to rest? What is this desire that keeps calling the dead back from the crypt, the place where it is kept “safe”, to recall Castricano’s remark about the economic function of a crypt, for us and perhaps from...
us (9)? These are questions unique to the Gothic revenant, to the zombie figure and its subgenre, which exacts a high price indeed inside its fictional and representational parameters: the complete destruction of civilization, the human, the world.

One thing that I do not want to suggest is that the resurgence and serialization of zombie films in popular culture and film in and of itself is what makes the zombie a relevant revenant figure for study in the humanities. Rather, I want to stress that zombie films in particular have significant resonance for the United States, especially in the case of the zombie film subgenre, which is not particular to that nation but in which the majority of films are produced with predominantly America-centric concerns. Although 9/11 was clearly in and of itself a media and mediated event involving the complex machinery of technology, politics, and popular culture, it is in film in particular that the cultural trauma of America is reflected. To my mind, it is not a coincidence that since the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 zombie films and television shows have dramatically increased in popularity; they are bringing into sharp focus serious and not easily dismissible fears and anxieties that I would argue coalesce around a discourse of posthumanism. To be clear, 9/11 as an event does not specifically address posthumanism as a central concern, and yet, mediations of the event certainly do. That is to say, the social anxiety of terror has discovered new terrors.

126 As I have pointed out at other junctures, zombie films do not resonate only with the trauma of 9/11, which is largely understood as a trauma of the Western world, but with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Rwandan genocide, bombing in Northern Ireland, the gassing of the Kurds, and so on. It would also be remiss to ignore the contributions of Italian film directors like Lucio Fulci (Zombie (1979)), New Zealand’s Peter Jackson (Braindead (1992)), and many other international contributors to the genre, but to engage with them all is too broad in scope here. Nevertheless, it seems that the majority of zombie films, many of which are produced in America, are pre-occupied with 9/11 and American trauma; even British film 28 Days Later (2002) visually references New York’s Ground Zero. As Derrida points out, “shock waves” produced by 9/11 depend on the “complex machinery” of politics, history and media, whereas comparable trauma outside American or European space is downplayed (“Autoimmunity” 92). This may in part account for the resonance of British zombie films in North America, but my inclusion of 28 Days Later in this study is due to its role in re-defining the zombie as both fast, alive, and “animalized” in reductive terms.
particularly the terror of a fragile and unstable articulation of the limits of the human at a
time when, once again, some are seen as lesser humans in order to routinize violence against
them. In zombie films, a posthuman approach necessitates a close look at how the human is
defined, by who, and to what purpose. As a case in point, United States Defense Secretary
Donald Rumsfeld’s characterization of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay as “living dead”—
that is, the intended targets of American bombs and thus disposable lives and bodies—signals
that zombie film and figure has become a way not just for culture to mediate terror, but for
political rhetoric to mediate terror as well. Rumsfeld’s mediation of living dead is important
because it suggests that fictional figures and narratives impact the real world by mapping a
relation to social and political life, rather than just suggesting that zombie film merely
reflects fears and anxieties. In short, calling the Guantanamo Bay prisoners “living dead” has
political implications for how mediations contaminate and transform how we respond to
terror, theorize violence, and engage in a necropolitics that is invested in determining whose
lives matter.

Taking a posthuman approach to the films I have examined focuses attention on the
ways in which the question of the human is integral to a real world understanding of terror,
particularly when how one speaks about terrorists echoes the way zombie films include a
pervasive “us” versus “them” rhetoric. As I alluded to earlier, zombie films, particularly
Romero’s Land of the Dead (2005), set out to influence real life politics by providing a
scathing critique of the Bush administration and the treatment of ethnic minorities (and
perhaps by extension, those who might be accused of being terrorists) in America that might
encourage viewers to interpret 9/11 and the “War on Terror” in new ways. Using Big Daddy
(Eugene Clark), a sympathetic African-American zombie who leads the others against the
‘human’ raiders at Fiddler’s Green, Romero seems to deliberately contradict Rumsfeld’s black and white, reductive labelling of the Guantanamo detainees as non-human terrorists, as well as the notion that American intervention in Iraq was justified. Similarly, in AMC’s *The Walking Dead*, there is an increasing focus on necropolitics and what it means to be or not be human in America, and to what extent this is determined by belonging to a particular group that considers its own interest and safety at the expense of others. Part of the formulaic appeal of the zombie sub-genre of film is found in the self-justified, sometimes necessary, sometimes defensive, and often gleeful right of the human survivors to kill the living dead in any gruesome way imaginable in the interest of self-preservation, and with impunity. Many post-apocalyptic zombie films stress the sheer pleasure, or at best the indifference or apathy, involved in killing or maiming the undead by those who identify as human: for instance, bored survivors on the adjacent rooftops of a mall and gun shop in *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) kill time and assert their human bond by challenging each other to kill zombie-celebrity lookalikes in the horde of undead below; in *Diary of the Dead* (2008) bands of human survivors hang zombies and shoot away their body parts for sport; in *Dead Girl* (2008), two boys discover a restrained female zombie and rape her repeatedly in a macabre discovery of adolescent sexuality; and in *The Walking Dead*, zombies serve a myriad of functions: increasing the excitement of a staged fight for public entertainment, as moving targets for shooting practice, as camouflage for in order to ward off other zombies from the living, as experimental bodies for surgery and Caesarian section, biological weapons unleashed deliberately on those perceived to be enemies, and as instruments of torture for bound living victims at various points in the series.127 These examples are hardly exhaustive, yet they

---

127 In the heavily fortified community of Woodbury, entertainment consists of chained zombies that form a straining ring around two men fighting to the death. The town’s sadistic leader, better known as the Governor
resonate strongly with the image of Guantanamo Bay’s prisoners as living dead who are subject to brutality, denied any claim to basic rights, and at the mercy of a sovereign state (or on the big and small screen, living survivors) that can destroy or discard them at whim. Overall then, it is the real tendency to politicize terror by discursively producing some groups as sub-human—and thus worthy of being killed, controlled, abused, and so on—while elevating others to the socially constructed position of human that is an undercurrent in zombie films. Defining the human ensures the protection of some and the peril of others, and if the limits of the normalized human subject are made clear, it becomes impermissible to routinize violence against those who are conceptualized as being outside of it.

Coming Full Circle: Apocalyptic Un-Veiling and the Terror of Dehumanization

Žižek has called the return of the living dead “the fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture” (“The Real” 22), and as such, he draws attention to America’s pre-occupation with apocalyptic narratives featuring a figure that refuses to be repressed and properly mourned. Derrida remarks that in the United States, one is more sensitive to “phenomena of prophetism, messianism, eschatology, and of the apocalypse-here-now” (“Of an Apocalyptic Tone” 90). Hypothesizing why apocalypse features so strongly in the cultural imagination of Americans means looking at 9/11 as a cultural and political moment, as well as the function of apocalypse. Writing of 9/11, Baudrillard provides one theory as to why America has remained pre-occupied with apocalypse and destruction:

(David Morrisey), unleashes a truckload of undead in the backyard of the Prison where Rick Grimes has taken shelter with his group of survivors, and Michonne (Danai Gurira), a machete wielding companion to fellow female survivor Andrea (Laurie Holden), leads two impotent zombies with arms and jaws removed to disguise her from other undead.
The fact that we have dreamt of this event, that everyone without exception has dreamt of it—because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree—is unacceptable to the Western moral conscience. Yet it is a fact, and one that can indeed be measured by the emotive violence of all that has been said and written in an effort to dispel it”… “They did it, but we wished for it” (5)

The fantasy of the end of America is re-lived again and again in the apocalyptic narrative, which remains a safe space to explore the result of such a wish without guilt. For some critics like Mathias Nilges, the sociopolitical function of post-apocalyptic representations of America in the context of “The War on Terror” is to resolve fear by looking at the beauty of destruction post-9/11. Using I am Legend (2007) as a case in point, Nilges reads the post-apocalyptic 9/11 as a pastoral, serene environment where nature has taken back the city and Neville (Will Smith) spends his days in simplicity, as “opposed to the complexity of our present” (“The Aesthetics of Destruction” 30). As post-apocalyptic it imagines the future as complete, the end as having passed, but what remains is a deceptive form of escapism from the present moment. The fantasy here is of apocalypse that allows starting over, but Nilges’ reading is problematic in that he suggests horror must be introduced in the form of mutants and isolation to mar the beauty of destruction (25), and yet the entire point is that they are introduced. The film suggests that the post-apocalyptic world is desperately lonely and

---

128I focus on zombie films here because unlike the general plethora of science fiction and disaster films in general, such as Independence Day (1996), The Day After Tomorrow (2004), and countless others, they emphasize devastation and not the triumph of America or the human more broadly, which to my mind calls questions of human exceptionalism and American exceptionalism more confrontationally into question.

129This film is a retelling of Richard Matheson’s novel I Am Legend (1954), which was the inspiration for Romero’s Night of the Living Dead (1968). Other film adaptations of the novel include The Last Man on Earth (1964) and The Omega Man (1971).
dangerous; moreover, it promises that Neville is the last human, and as such he is a legend and a source of fear for the reigning vampiric mutants that roam Manhattan.\(^{130}\) *I am Legend* posits the end of the human subject and reveals the creatures to be sentient—that is, emotionally and intellectually intelligent and perceptive—in a way that Neville himself is not. Neville is subsequently viewed by the creatures as monstrous in his own right, and because the viewer is prompted to ascribe sentience to the creatures rather than the ‘human’ protagonist, the film troubles the dichotomy of human and monster and the category of human itself rather than reinforce conservative and re-assuring humanist ideology. Other post-apocalyptic films like *The Road* (2009) envision America as irrevocably destroyed and play upon the tropes of the zombie film by positioning survivors as cruel, opportunistic, and cannibalistic. As counter-narratives to the unshakable empire of America, zombie films have remained the most consistent in the genre; they reveal a disappointment with apocalypse and apocalyptic rhetoric, which David Pagano argues holds and has held “the promise of security and identity through space and stasis” (84); a revitalized America freed from its constraints and able to start again. Derrida too suggests that “there will never be an apocalypse, the apocalypse deceives…there is the apocalypse *without* apocalypse” (95), and so rather than promise a new beginning, the apocalyptic genre does something different: it circumvents, it reveals, and it simultaneously conceals in a way that other genres and realistic depictions and assertions do not allow.

In the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the film industry privileged narratives that were conservative and un-critical of America and its later involvement in the

\(^{130}\) The idea that the pastoral is somehow equivalent to safety and a new beginning for apocalyptic survivors is taken to task repeatedly in *28 Days Later*; the ruined abbey in a field that the protagonists sleep under still plagues Jim with nightmares of isolation, desertion, and exposure to attack.
war in Iraq. Media and political figures like Bill O’Reilly and Donald Rumsfeld—both of whom claimed that maintaining pride and positivity in the United States was a priority that would be marred by the un-American act of making the torture photos of Abu Ghraib available to the public—contextualized the drive to emphasize solidarity and the unified front of an America suffering from loss yet emerging strong from the attacks of the World Trade Center with a sense of heroism and pride. In a bid to avoid confronting a wound too raw and new for the American public while bolstering patriotism, realistic depictions of the event, movies featuring mass destruction, and films and television shows that would too strongly resonate with the attacks were altered or had their release dates pushed back. In some cases, as in Zoolander (2001), the Twin Towers were digitally removed from shots. Films such as the docudramas The World Trade Center (2006) and United 93 (2006) that did dramatize the event focused on the average American individual and their capability to take heroic action; they suggest a righteous nation besieged by evil outsiders and provide narratives of hope and courage as America fights back. As I suggested in Chapter 3, films like Black Hawk Down (2001) and Behind Enemy Lines (2001) echoed the same patriotic story, emphasized revenge and the pursuit of justice, and deflected both the trauma inflicted by 9/11 as well as any criticism of the Bush administration’s response to the event. Because they did not address the event directly, such films were more palatable to a country that had experienced more than enough trauma, and they confirmed notions of American exceptionalism and moral superiority. These narratives served as propaganda and drew their political clout from being deliberately apolitical and un-critical of American ideology. As discovered by Natalie Maines of The Dixie Chicks and talk show host Bill Maher, who were blacklisted and fired respectively for presenting critical counter-narratives to the blindly patriotic ones, criticism
of the Bush administration was considered un-patriotic and blatantly in-admissible.\textsuperscript{131} Realistic depictions of 9/11, barring the carefully constructed and patriotic realism of Oliver Stone’s \textit{World Trade Center} (2006) and Paul Greengrass’s \textit{United 93} (2006), were considered too traumatic and insensitive, and the films that were made were necessarily apolitical, shying away from negative explorations of the “War on Terror” in an effort to reassure the public of their safety and righteousness. At first glance, 2013’s \textit{World War Z} seems invested in establishing just such a narrative of American exceptionalism, heroism, and benevolence using the very genre that has most consistently undermined not just the benevolence of the “human”, but particularly American values, ideology, and institutions of military and medical control. It ultimately fails to establish this comforting narrative by calling into question truisms about the human, the environment, and patriotism; its ending, while promising for humanity, suggests vigilance, war, and vaccination as a balm for the symptoms of the zombie apocalypse rather than finding and eradicating the cause for the zombie virus. Without this, it promises, like the threat of terrorism itself, terror will keep coming back. \textit{World War Z} is thus important because it suggests the need for Hollywood to undermine the power of zombie apocalyptic narratives that cause interference in the dominant representation of American morality and righteousness over a decade after the attacks. In so doing, Hollywood tries, and fails, to claim them as yet another space in which America emerges strong, healed, and triumphant. In attempting to reveal a ‘truth’ about America after the apocalypse—that the nation has emerged stronger, more prepared for threat, and triumphant as a world leader—\textit{World War Z} conceals a dissenting counter-narrative that questions how America defines humans; an important consideration given the

\textsuperscript{131} See “Dixie Chicks pulled from Air after Bashing Bush.”
demonization and suspicion of Muslim or decidedly dark-skinned people following 9/11.

While the film promises one truth: the prevailing heroism of the United States and the
reification of the human subject in limited, exclusionary terms, an alternate truth is revealed.
Despite the normative political and ideological ambitions of the film, the allegorical vehicle
for them, that is, the zombie apocalypse, reveals itself to be a genre that is anything but
conservative.

Apocalyptic narratives and the zombie apocalypse in particular have proven to be an
effective means by which censorship has been circumvented since 2001, particularly since
the tense political climate made the cultural moment around 9/11 particularly difficult to
think through and explore in other genres given the level of censorship involved, but also
because they often deny definitive ends and conservative, re-assuring narratives that presume
to re-establish absolutes—particularly, if not overtly, the definition of human that is based
upon exclusionary tactics. For Derrida, “nothing is less conservative than the apocalyptic
genre. And seeing that it is an apocryphal, masked, coded genre, it can give some detours in
order to mislead another vigilance, that of censorship” (Derrida “Of an Apocalyptic Tone”
89). Derrida reminds us that in the Roman Empire, apocalyptic writings increased in step
with State censorship in order to subvert it and catch it unawares (89), allowing a critical
counter-narrative to the dominant political discourse of the time. Zombie films, as I have
suggested throughout, can likewise afford to be scathingly critical and reflective of their
current cultural moments in a way that is vastly intertextual, historically invested, and
increasingly adaptable. This is especially relevant following 9/11 and the inadmissibility of
perspectives that sought to criticize America, to suggest its complicity or role in the attack on
the Twin Towers, to direct attention away from American civilians and towards the loss of
life of non-citizens, or to question the ethics of waging war in Iraq and the abhorrent treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay that undermined America’s heroic self-determination. Again, un-articulated but central to the rhetoric of war and invasion is the default human subject—in this case, Americans and predominantly white Americans—whose lives, losses, and traumas are illegitimately privileged over those considered to be subhuman by comparison. Of course, and as suggested throughout this thesis, these resonances are not particular to the United States, but are internationally, intertextually, and interculturally represented. At stake overall is the growing anxiety about a human figure that is increasingly fragile, and whose limits are precariously defined in a time, yet again, when violence against some people is undertaken on the basis of their lesser humanity.

Drawing attention to dehumanization as a product of anthropocentrism in the zombie apocalypse, zombie films highlight the illegitimacy and anxiety of this dehumanization in their own narratives and resonate with the outside world. Further, and suggestively, Derrida claims that apocalyptic discourse can also get round censorship thanks to its genre and its cryptic ruses. By its very tone, the mixing of voices’, genres, and codes, and the breakdown [le détraquement] of destinations, apocalyptic discourse can also dismantle the dominant contract or concordant. It is a challenge to the established admissibility of messages and to the enforcement or the maintenance of order (89).

Fantastical, horrific, apocalyptic and allegorical genres offer alternative ways to interpret and process events outside of the political truisms of the state, particularly when such genres
couch their narratives in subversive criticism that resists simple answers, ends, or destinations. In Derrida’s estimation apocalyptic discourse is paradoxically rooted in both revelation—“disclosure, discovery, uncovering, unveiling, the veil lifted from, the truth revealed about the thing” (“Of an Apocalyptic Tone” 64)—and a “cryptic ruse”; an act of misdirection or trickery. Such narratives reveal as they conceal, which contextualizes the secrets involved in telling horror stories. For Stephen King, horror explores “secrets best left untold and things best left unsaid” but nonetheless “promise[s] to tell us the secret” (Danse Macabre 50), echoing Derrida’s claim that what is revealed might signify itself but “does not show itself or say itself” and “cannot or must not be handed over to its self-evidence” (64).

That Derrida refers to apocalyptic discourse as cryptic is significant: etymologically, crypt refers to a burial place; something hidden, concealed, or as Castricano also points out, a place that has the economic function of a vault that is meant to keep, save, or “to keep safe that which would return from it to act, often in our place” (“The First Partition” 9). In the context of the walking dead, the cadaver returned from the crypt to divulge its secrets, the living repeatedly inherit the trauma of the past and are taxed with the anxieties of the present and the future; they are promised in true apocalyptic form that there is always more or better, yet to come. Partly then, what the zombie apocalypse reveals and conceals is an undercurrent of persistent unease and anticipation in America—but not just in America—of terror to come: in other words, “there is a traumatism with no possible work of mourning when the evil comes from the possibility to come of the worst, from the repetition to come—through worse” (Derrida qtd. in Redfield 19). I say partly here because the zombie apocalypse also brings to light not just a current anxious mood or mindset, but as I have argued in each chapter, a politically invested preoccupation with what spurs or else constitutes current apprehensions:
the destabilization of the figure of the human via technological and biological engineering innovation; an implicit troubling of the representation of the ‘animal’ and the ‘human’ as mutually exclusive and essentialized categories as animal ethics comes to the forefront of current debate; the ongoing threat of war, terrorism, and pandemic, and so on. Like the fantasy of the return of the dead from the crypt, there is an anticipation of terror to come that indicates, 14 years after the attack on the Twin Towers, the event is not over and never can be.

In the context of the name-date toponym 9/11, the event itself will indeed never have ended, and as such it lends itself as a historical and cultural event to the Gothic trope of the return of the repressed (or of the dead), deferred endings and an apocalypse always yet to come, and the repetitive, self-referential nature of zombie films I have been discussing. As a name date without year, 9/11 will repeat yearly on the calendar; it will return like the undead to haunt the living with the memory of the dead. Redfield claims that “‘the date is a future anterior: it gives the time one assigns to anniversaries to come’” … “to name an event ‘September 11’ is to make the event into its own memorial, always-already memorialized” (20), and so one might say it is an event that is dead and gone but continuously, endlessly re-animated. The complex, impossible work of bringing the event to an end is encompassed not just via the toponym 9/11, which makes itself a singular event by effacing and erasing other past historical events associated with that date, but also by “Ground Zero.” As a capitalized proper name that now refers only to the former site of the World Trade Center rather than as military jargon that was, according to Redfield, used during testing of the atom bomb and

132 Redfield references “9-1-1 Day” and September 11, 1973, when Salvador Allende was overthrown “in a U.S.–backed coup that ushered in one of the worst reigns of terror in the twentieth century” (17).
after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it bears more of a “visibly historical stamp” (23). Redfield claims that in this toponym, “the melancholic aura limning a nation-state seeking to ‘reconstitute its imagined wholeness,’ while denying its own vulnerability and half-remembering its own murderous past, is more in evidence” (23). America, then, is a nation haunted by the past and caught in the paradox of a proper name that is “evocative of obliteration and living on—[which] at once feeds the fantasy of the subject’s omnipotence, forecloses the work of mourning, and sustains an abiding anxiety” (26). No wonder then, that 9/11 haunts the cultural imaginary and that it, like the zombie apocalypse America continues to visually consume, continues to return without ending. It is worth recalling here that 9/11 is not just a cultural phenomenon, but an actual event; one that is heavily mediated and complicated by the tension between the real and the fictional and which recalls actual trauma of lives lost, and not just those of United States nationals. The blurring of reality and mediation is encompassed, though not exhaustively, by the oft cited observation that 9/11 was like a movie; that in fact, terrorists modeled their attack on American disaster films, and representations of the event in film, music, or other media was subject to censorship or otherwise turned into propaganda in accordance with what was considered patriotic or by contrast, un-patriotic or too traumatic. Traumatic historical events, as I suggest in each chapter, haunt the archive of zombie films both before, during, and after 9/11, including nuclear bombing, the Israel/Palestine conflict, Rwandan Genocide, 9/11 itself, and so on, suggesting a never ending, self-reflexive genre that refuses to let the dead rest for too long both in America and outside its borders. These events, however, are also mediated in the context of zombie films, and references to them are still couched in representations that are distinct from the actual events and the actual loss and mourning associated with them.
Nevertheless, these representations do assert themselves in such a way as to remind the viewer of their real life antecedents, which haunt the films in which they resonate. Apocalypse then, now, and to come forecloses not just the work of mourning but also the closing of a work, a narrative, a series, or a history, and the fictional and the real interact in complex and fluid ways within these films. I want to reiterate that it is not just the apocalypse and ‘ends’ that the zombie films explore; speaking of apocalypse then, now, and in future is meant to suggest that the tension and terror associated with anticipation of the end to come festers in the present as well as the past and the future; they are politically invested in the present moment both socially and politically as they mediate terror about genetic engineering and bioweaponry (*Resident Evil* (2002)), pandemic, rage and aggression as a product of an increasingly expedited society (*28 Days Later* (2002)), what it means to confront the spectre of the animal as a part of human being, what is at stake and how will the war on terror be fought in a global context (*WWZ* (2013), what the effects of mediation itself does to our idea of humanity (*Diary of the Dead* (2008)), and above all, perhaps, not what it means to be human, but what it means to acknowledge that the human is an illusory construct propagated on sexism, speciesism, and racism. I want to avoid reaching a limit to the apocalyptic tone, which may be said to have done with what does not address ends, by acknowledging that these films all engage with ends but also with ongoing terror in the present.

**A Look to Future Ends**

Although I have not delved too deeply into the affective politics of the films I examine, it is worth acknowledging here that horror film in general, and arguably, zombie films in particular, aim to create an affective response in viewers that to my mind is unmatched by any other genre because it focuses on causing physiological affect rooted in
fear and/or disgust and bypasses rational thought process. As noted by Altheide in the introduction, fear—of terrorists, of the threat of biological warfare, of outsiders—was used to great effect by the Bush administration and the United States media to galvanize a political agenda in the Middle East and on home soil; to set up the a false dichotomy of “us” versus “them” through mediation. Mediation, then, is a powerful tool with which to transform how we mourn loss of particular lives, anticipate the future, generate an emotional response, and frame what events are worthy of such investment, and so on. As Redfield claims in the context of 9/11 and the rhetoric of terror, fear is “capable of unmaking our world… [t]he greater our terror, the greater the shock to identity: the mind goes blank and loses control of the body, the body loses control of itself” (77). Horror is meant to enthrall and to shock. In the case of horror that resists closure and the establishment of the status quo, a questioning of social norms and identity is the goal. Further, as has been pointed out by numerous gothic scholars, fans of horror often exclaim—with glee—that successful films ‘scare the shit’ out of them. The indication is that there is great pleasure in reveling in the taboo of destruction and terror, as Baudrillard suggests in another way when he points out the desire for the frightening yet compelling destruction of the United States as world power. Part of this is because horror is visceral and penetrates through the walls of rational thought and straight to the nerve endings, so that emotions of disgust, rage, and terror are unfiltered and themselves as unmediated as possible. Such reactions may have great potential for political thought generally. Rather than serve as a political tool for government or those in power, horror might instead use fear to rally behind counter-narratives that offer new opportunities for thought. For Anna Powell, horror uses an affective style in terms of sound, cinematography and editing as a tool to arouse visceral sensations; “horror’s affective force is a potent
experiential process” that is based in aesthetic complexity (“Introduction: New Directions” 8). Powell draws attention to the definitions of horror—to “bristle or shudder,” a “‘painful emotion compounded of loathing and fear’”, excitement at that which shocks and is revolting—as a way to emphasize “affective potency” that does not distinguish between the impact of actual versus fictional horror (8). The implications of physiological response to terror while watching zombie films might then suggest that the responses of fear, outrage, etcetera might be powerful enough to engage viewers in the questions at stake in zombie films emotionally rather than just rationally, which might prolong the affect and effect of the films and their political and cultural investments on viewers. Moreover, Powell points out the way in which film viewing can cause emotional responses and physical arousal as our bodies respond by intensive movements to imaginary pleasures; these pleasures are held in muscular tension, which becomes more intense as we become immersed in a specific pleasure that drives other sensations out of focus” (“The Movement Image” 110). Pleasure, then, as well as desire, is an important consideration of how horror film entices and possibly mobilizes audiences, although a thorough analysis of the complexity of desire, pleasure, and affectation are outside the scope of this current project. It is certainly an area of study that requires far more critical attention.

Grappling with the fantasy figure of the zombie has also meant grappling with the fantasy figure of the human; examining the extent to which zombie films reify either or both figures—for instance, how Romero argues for the slow-moving zombie and the human, by comparison, as fully definable but fundamentally flawed—or else destabilize them to suggest that some transformation and destabilization is at play. This can be seen most clearly in *Resident Evil*, which draws on the very real capacities of genetic engineering to catalyze our
fears; not of becoming something other than human, but of realizing via the blurring of ontological boundaries that we have never been human. By using bioengineering as a springboard, drawing on corporate capitalism as anthropocentric, and highlighting the dehumanization that results from corporate capitalism in the films, it is possible to call the figure of the heteronormative, white, European male as the pinnacle of the human subject into question. There is a struggle within the films I have chosen to critique and contest the hegemonic figure of the human and with limited success. Put another way, there is often an insistence that the time of the human is ending juxtaposed with the persistence of characters who are representative of the human figure from the enlightenment: the Vitruvian Man. Recalling Deborah Christie’s warning, any move we make to “post” something—like the human or humanism—ends up tying us to what we are posting (“A Dead New World” 69). At the same time, David Pagano rightly contends that Romero’s work offers us allegories in which the zombies are all too human, but that “it is now too simple even to say that zombies represent humans” (85). Pagano never unpacks why this might be the case, but once one starts to call representation and the figure of the human into question, it becomes impossible to essentialize the human or the zombie. Zombie narratives ask us to confront the zombie as a restless, embodied reminder of our own eventual death and decay, a liminal figure that wears the anatomy of the human animal and as such is indicative of our mortality and perhaps our fundamental unimportance in the world and universe at large. By embodying an instinctual and mindless urge to consume as part of a representation of the human animal, the zombie figure is irreconcilable with classical humanism’s vision of a subject established in terms of intelligence and logic. As such, zombie films work to collapse definitive categories of ontology and dichotomy, such as the distinction between dead/alive, and takes the concept of
humanism to task as they explore the human ability to bring about the end of days—particularly since 2001. Insofar as zombie films confront humanism, they are also narratives that prompt us to consider ecological crisis as we, like zombies, endlessly consume the planet’s resources. This is not to say that zombies are merely mindless, but that their stories allegorize the way that anthropocentrism encourages us to stand in the midst of a charnel ground without really seeing it and our place in creating it by bending the Earth, its resources, and its inhabitants to the needs of human beings—and only some human beings at that. They invoke the promise and threat of what technological and medical innovation and genetic modification mean for the human and for the planet moving forward. Where, they seem to ask, is the end of the human, the end of the world, the end of the conversation? What is to become of us? Posthumanism has been one useful framework in which to explore these questions, but, as Van Helsing says in the quintessential text of the living dead, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, there is much more “work—wild work—to be done” (396). This is particularly true when one considers the frequency with which representations of ‘the animal’ and the animalistic permeate the sub-genre, for which an approach that further merges posthumanism and critical animal studies would be pivotal.

One of the ends I could not pursue to the extent I would have liked in my thesis is an analysis of the complex, and relatively untouched and un-noticed, interplay between human animals, non-human animals, and zombies in film. As zombies increasingly embody speed and specific negative connotations of ‘animalized’ behavior—growling, chittering, biting, roaring, teeth-baring, attacking and tearing the flesh from living victims, and mindless, instinctual carnage in the interest of consumption—they bring into sharp focus the desire and representational move to extricate the ‘human’ from the animal; to re-render the zombie
figure as ‘other’ in animalized, hyperbolized, and self-serving terms. Instead of reifying the human, however, these fast and ferocious un-dead (or living-ill, as it were, depending on the film one views) draw attention with increasing urgency to something else: a culture awakening to a cognitive ethology, in Mark Bekoff’s terms,133, and the subjectivity of non-human animals. This focus on representations of the animal requires far more teasing out than I can do in my current work, but is something I plan to return to; as yet, I cannot answer how it ends.

The impossibility of standing outside or inside of an apocalypse with any great certainty and of coming to a close is articulated by Derrida, recalling the Mobius Strip and the vexation that can follow from trying to traverse it with the goal of finding an end, of being on the inside or outside of a narrative or context:

what if this outside of the apocalypse was within the apocalypse?...what is “(with)in” and what is “outside” a text, here of this text, (with)in and outside these volumes of which we do not know whether they are open or closed? Of this volume written, you remember this, “on the inside and out,” it is said at the very end: do not seal this; “‘Do not seal the words of the inspiration of this book….’” Do not seal, that is to say, do not close, but also do not sign. (95)

I will not presume to end the conversation here; I will not suggest that what I have attempted to un-veil or uncover in my analysis is not being simultaneously re-concealed by the

133 Bekoff is a Professor Emeritus of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology who lectures internationally on cognitive ethology, or the study of animal minds. See, for instance, Species of Mind: The Philosophy and Biology of Cognitive Ethology.
necessary limits one must place on oneself to say anything concise on a subject. I am sure as “the end” is now imminent for this project that elsewhere close by the mouth of a crypt is opening to bring yet another apocalypse anew.
Works Cited


---. “Blame.” 1-49.

---. “Good-Byes.” 1-33.


“All the Rage.” The Jane Goodall Institute of Canada. 1 Nov 2014. Online.


_28 Days Later._ Dir. Danny Boyle. Perf. Cillian Murphy, Naomie Harris, Christopher Eccleston, Brendan Gleeson and Megan Burns. 20th Century Fox, 2002. DVD.


Gane, Nicholas. “When we have Never been Human, What is to be Done?: Interview with Donna Haraway.” Theory, Culture and Society 23. 7-8 (2006): 135-158. Online.


---. “Prequel, or Preface.” xi-xiv. Online.


Schaefer, Sandy. “‘World War Z’ Original Ending Revealed; Sequel to Begin Development. Screen Rant: The #1 Independent Movie and Television News Website. Online. 28 December 2014.


