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Fixing Ground Zero: Race and Religion in Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend*

Abstract

Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend* is a complex intertext of Matheson's novel of the same name and its two previous film adaptations. While the film attempts to depict racism as monstrous, the frequent invocation of 9/11 imagery and Christian symbolism throughout the film recodes the vampiric dark-seekers as radical Islamic terrorists. This serves to further enshrine an us/Christians vs. them/Muslim dichotomy present in post-9/11 America, a dichotomy that the film presents as "curable" through the spread of Christianity and the fall of Islam.

Keywords

Francis Lawrence, *I Am Legend*, *The Omega Man*, Christianity, Islam, Islamophobia, Crusades, Bush, 9/11, Vampires, Monsters

Author Notes

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Race and religion are critical components in both Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) and the later film versions of the novel. In Matheson's novel, the main character, Robert Neville, struggles against a vampiric threat to his existence, while frequently musing on his inability to believe in anything greater than himself. Reflecting racial tensions in the United States of the 1950s, Neville is eventually revealed to be the "last of the old race,"¹ executed by a new society of vampires who he once mused had "no means of support, no measures for proper education, . . . [nor] the voting franchise."² Conversely, both Ubaldo Ragona and Sidney Salkow's *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* (1971) reframe the character of Robert Neville as a Christ-figure who would heal the world with his blood and defeat a race of communist sympathizers (in the case of *The Last Man on Earth*) or Manson-family clones (*The Omega Man*), thinly veiled as a vampiric threat to a democratic, Christian United States.

It is out of these competing interpretations of race and religion that the most recent version, Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend* (2007), emerges. Like Matheson, Lawrence situates racial conflict in America as a principal theme of the film, primarily through the use of Bob Marley's music and narratives of his activism. Like *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Omega Man*, Lawrence also positions Neville as a Christ-figure who is prepared to save the world with his blood, a Christ-figure who is guided by an unseen – but certainly not unfelt – divine presence throughout the film. Through this blending, the "dark-seekers" of the film become lingering racist elements in the United States, racist elements that are ultimately expunged by Neville's salvific blood (i.e., Christian doctrine).

However, I contend that this message is complicated by the intertextual dialogue that Lawrence's film maintains with its cinematic and literary precursors³ and contemporary events. Specifically, several scholars have pointed out that the film enshrines 9/11 imagery, the conservative values of the Bush presidency, and the sense that America needs to "re-masculinize" itself after the emasculating 9/11 attacks.⁴ This enshrinement then encounters two unique features of Lawrence's film: 1) Christian symbolism that depicts Neville as guided by an unseen hand and 2) the "empty space" of a national threat to the United States left behind from the intertext of *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Omega Man*, "empty space" previously filled by communism or neo-pagan hippy groups that were seen as a threat to the United States. These three elements join to construct a form of Christianity that sees Islam as a racialized Other; the dark-seekers of the film become radical Islamic terrorists bent on wiping out a nation protected by God and defeated by Robert Neville's salvific blood.

In order to draw out this thesis in the clearest way possible, I begin with depictions of race and religion in Matheson's novel. I then move to the same depictions within *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Omega Man*, as the two are joined thematically by their pro-Christian and democratic establishment imagery. From there, I move to discuss the topic of race and religion in Lawrence's *I Am Legend* and the enshrinement of 9/11 imagery and the Bush presidency. In all three cases, portions are not unique to this article but the material does constitute necessary background information for the reader. With Lawrence's film situated in

its context (both intertext and history), I then turn to the interaction of these elements to complete my thesis.

Race and Religion in Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954)

Racial tensions bubble beneath the surface of Matheson's novel.⁵ Robert Neville, the protagonist of *I Am Legend* (1954), is described by Matheson as "...a tall man, thirty-six, born of English-German stock, his features indistinguished except for the long, determined mouth and the bright blue of his eyes"⁶ and having "lank blond hair."⁷ Conversely, the vampires are frequently described with reference to their "blackness:" "He sank down on the couch and sat there, shaking his head slowly. It was no use; they'd beaten him, the black bastards had beaten him"⁸ and "Do you want to be changed into a black unholy animal?"⁹

Perhaps the clearest indication of the association between vampires and African Americans is when Neville muses internally on the nature of the vampire:

Friends, I come before you to discuss the vampire; a minority element if there ever was one... Vampires are prejudiced against... Why, then, this unkind prejudice, this thoughtless bias?... He has no means of support, no measures for proper education, he has not the voting franchise. No wonder he is compelled to seek out a predatory nocturnal existence. Robert Neville grunted a surly grunt. Sure, sure, he thought, but would you let your sister marry one? He shrugged. You got me there, buddy, you got me there.¹⁰

Here Matheson tips his hand. Reflecting the political climate of the time, Neville muses on issues of importance to race in America. His list reflects housing and income inequality, segregation in education, and voting disenfranchisement. The vampire stands in as a "minority element," an element that people are "prejudiced

against” and bears all of the same plights that African Americans did at the time of Matheson’s writing.

Moreover, Matheson’s novel anticipates some of the aforementioned developments in racial equality in America. As Neville tortures the vampires he encounters, he muses “... but for some affliction he didn’t understand, these people were the same as he.”¹¹ Despite this near realization of their mutual kinship, Neville continues to kill vampires. Eventually, he is caught by the same group he persecutes and discovers that the living infected are attempting to rebuild a new society from the ruins of the old, a society that can only be safe once Neville is executed. In his final dialogue with Ruth, a sympathetic vampire in the new regime, she muses that Neville is “the last of the old race.”¹²

Just as Matheson’s novel anticipates developments in racial equality in the 1950s and 60s, so too does it anticipate the rejection of Christianity by the counterculture movement of the 1960s. Neville notes throughout the novel that the cross is only effective against those vampires who were once Christian, that the symbol is efficacious against “neither a Jew nor a Hindu nor a Mohammedan nor an atheist.”¹³ This undermines traditional Christian notions of universality, reducing Christianity to just one more tradition among a number of other traditions and suggesting that all of these traditions are equally subjective.

This rejection of Christianity’s truth claims emerges again when Neville reflects on religion during the plague. With an echo of E.B. Tylor, Neville claims in their final days “in a typical desperation for quick answers, easily understood, people had turned to primitive worship as the solution.”¹⁴ This “primitive worship”

is depicted in Matheson's work as a Christian revival meeting that Neville struggles to free himself from.

This disdain for Christianity is perhaps most evident in Neville's reaction to the dog that he discovers. At his most desperate, Neville is willing to consider prayer as a matter of last resort to ensure the safety of the only other living creature he knows of. Battling his "iconoclastic self," he gives in to the "desperate need to believe in a God that shepherded his own creations." In the end, this is in vain: "In a week the dog was dead."¹⁵

Both in summary and anticipation of the next section, it will suffice to say that Matheson's work is attempting to convey a message of racial equality and is exceptionally critical of established religion (Christianity, in particular). However, while Matheson's novel relegates Christianity to subjectivity, later film adaptations of the novel integrate Christian symbolism and messianic overtones into the character of Robert Neville. This has a significant impact on the content and meaning of the films as opposed to the book, an impact that will eventually be felt in Francis Lawrence's treatment of race in *I Am Legend*.

A Most Un-American Threat: *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Omega Man*

In contrast to the novel, the first two film adaptations of Matheson's *I Am Legend* depict Christianity in a positive light by casting their Robert Neville analogues in messianic roles. In the first film adaptation, *The Last Man on Earth* (dir. Ubaldo Ragona and Sidney Salkow, 1964), the main character, Dr. Robert Morgan (Vincent

Price), is injured during the new vampire regime's attempt to capture him. He retreats into a church, and is allowed to climb to the altar where he accuses the vampires of being "freaks" and "mutations" while behind him on the wall is the Latin phrase "*Ego sum via, veritas, et vita*" (I am the way, the truth, and the life). There he is killed, transfixing by a spear, before the altar of the church. Ruth, whom Morgan cured with his blood, runs to him, cradles him not unlike the Virgin Mary does for Christ in various renderings of the *Deposition from the Cross*, and declares in paraphrase of Luke 23:34, "they didn't know."

Similarly, *The Omega Man* (dir. Boris Sagal, 1971) elevates the curative powers of Robert Neville (Charlton Heston) to messianic levels.¹⁶ Rather than curing only Ruth, the Neville of *Omega Man* synthesizes a cure for all of humanity – thereby saving the human race – out of his own blood. Crucifixion motifs similarly abound in the film, such as when Neville is bound to a wooden wheel in a crucifixion pose by "The Family" – the vampire analogues of the film – or in the final scene when Neville dies in crucifixion pose (killed once more by a spear) in a fountain of water and blood.

These Christian elements to the film are undergirded by decidedly un-Christian antagonists. As Roberts points out in his recent article "Transforming the Hero of *I Am Legend*," *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Omega Man* reflect fears of communism, the Cold War, and the sense of an impending nuclear apocalypse. In *The Last Man on Earth*, the plague does not originate from inside the United States but is rather "carried on the wind" from Europe. "This fear and the plague's spread recall Karl Marx's words: 'A spectre is haunting Europe—the Spectre of

Communism.' *The Last Man on Earth* draws not just on Cold War nuclear fears but also dwells on Cold War communism fears to create a sense of paranoia, not just of foreigners, but also of neighbors who may be "infected" by foreign ideas—or the vampire virus."¹⁷ Similarly, in *The Omega Man*, "The Family stands for the collective; its cultish organization relies on a sense of community, taking on a quasi-communist structure, expressing solidarity in the chant 'The Family is One.'"¹⁸ This aspect of the creatures continues the Red Scare aspects seen in *The Last Man on Earth*. The Family is set on eliminating the individual Neville as it promotes a collective, communist identity.

While Roberts sees communism in The Family of *Omega Man*, other scholars have argued that the antagonists are rather representative of Charles Manson – whose trial began a year before the release of the film – and his Family. Although noting the film's framing narrative is a war between the two (then) communist powers of the USSR and China, Haas, Christensen and Haas claim that the Family's "nocturnal existence and distrust of science liken them to hippies, the 1970's 'back to the earth' movement, religious cults, and a mix of all of the above, the Manson family responsible for gruesome murders in the late 1960s."¹⁹ Similarly, Carlin and Jones link the whiteness of the Family to the "Helter Skelter" race war of the Manson Family and the opening scene of the film in which Heston is seen watching *Woodstock* to argue that the film is "an imaginative evocation of an apocalyptic Mansonian future."²⁰

Whether the threat is communism or hippie cults matters little; both were viewed as a threat to the perceived Christian bedrock of the United States. In the

ideological war between communist and non-communist nations, the latter most typically deployed two “weapons” against the former: democracy and Christianity.

As Dianne Kirby notes, Christianity

became a unifying force that reminded Europe and America of their shared fundamental beliefs and basic values, their common history and interests. The defence of Western civilisation and Christianity became anti-communism’s central rhetorical device, reinforcing the two fundamental contentions on which anti-communism rested: that communism was a supreme and unqualified evil, and that its purpose was world domination.²¹

Similarly, the threat the Manson family represents is a Christianity that has been warped and perverted to attack the established values of American society. It is the same underlying, allegorical tension that exists between the protagonists and antagonists of both films: the Robert Neville analogue (a democratic, Christian, individualist hero) against the vampires (an un-Christian, collectivist threat).

Light up the Darkness: Race and Religion in Francis Lawrence’s *I Am Legend*

More broadly, both films’ Christian elements are deployed to counter a force that was perceived as both a source of violence (in the possible nuclear encounter between Soviet Russia and the US) and a source of religious difference (the atheist elements of communism against the Christian elements of the US and Europe). Considering that Francis Lawrence’s *I Am Legend* has an intertextual relationship with the previously-mentioned films and novel, it bears consideration as to whether there is an analogous concern over a contemporary source of violence and difference. However, before this can be ascertained, it is necessary to illustrate the

treatment of both race and religion in the film as it is measurably different from either the previous two films or the novel.

From the perspective of religion, the habit of associating Robert Neville with Christ in the previous two films is by no means lost in Lawrence's version. The post-apocalyptic New York of the film is decorated for Christmas, locking the city in a perpetual Yuletide moment. In this eternal Christmas, Neville (Will Smith)²² one day notes to his dog: "It's my birthday." Similarly, the first time the viewer sees Neville in his home, a *Time* magazine cover graces the refrigerator with his picture and the headline "Savior." Directly afterwards, a question mark has been scratched in, presenting an open question to the audience as to whether Neville will be the savior that the world needs.

The viewer is not disappointed. As in *The Omega Man*, Neville is a doctor and indicates to the audience in his video records that he is attempting to transfer his immunity to the disease to his test subjects. The cure for the virus is ultimately synthesized from his blood,²³ and his sacrifice at the end of the film allows this sanguine salvation to be carried to the rest of the world, starting with the survivors' colony. As the gate opens on the colony, the first thing the viewer sees is the steeple of a white church, signifying that this colony is a Christian community.

At the same time, Francis Lawrence elevates the Christian symbolism in his adaptation through the salient image of the butterfly. The film begins with Dr. Alice Krippin (Emma Thompson) explaining that she has developed the cure for cancer by modifying the measles virus. Cutting to the present day, we see a red sports car cruising through the abandoned streets of New York. As the car whirls around a

corner, the camera continues to pan past its exit until the viewer sees several posters with the caption “God still loves us. Do we still love God?” One of the posters has the torn out shape of a butterfly, and due to the coloration of the posters, the viewer’s eye is first drawn to the butterfly and the caption “God still loves us.”²⁴ This conceptually links the butterfly through the rest of the film to its captioned phrase and the notion of enduring divine love even in a post-apocalyptic world.

This notion of God’s love is connected to Neville’s child, Marley (Willow Smith), throughout the greater part of the film. In flashbacks, the viewer watches Neville assist his family in their escape from Manhattan, scenes linked by Marley – a seeming island of calm amidst an ocean of chaos – encouraging her mother and father to “look at the butterfly.” When the characters Anna (Alice Braga) and Ethan (Charlie Tahan) are introduced, we catch a glimpse of Marley’s bedroom with butterflies scattered around the room.

The introduction of Anna also impacts the film’s message of God’s enduring love. After rescuing Neville from a suicidal attempt to kill the alpha infected, the camera captures a blurry view of Anna’s car through Neville’s eyes. The first thing we see is a cross swinging from the rearview mirror. When Anna asks Neville to join them on their journey to the survivor’s colony, he denies its existence. Anna insists that she knows it exists, and when pressed for the source of her knowledge Anna says, “God told me. He has a plan.... Neville, the world is quieter now; you just have to listen. If we listen, we can hear God’s plan.” Neville rejects this proposition with vigor, insisting “God didn’t do this, Anna: we did,”

listing off medical statistics regarding the Krippin virus in an attempt to counter her faith claim.

These elements – the butterfly, Marley, and Anna's request that Neville "listen" – flow together at the climactic moment of the film. As the alpha infected pounds against the protected glass enclosure in Neville's basement, the image of a butterfly emerges in the fractures. The sound cuts (i.e., the world becomes quieter), calming an otherwise chaotic scene, and the audience hears Marley's spectral voice command "Daddy, look at the butterfly." For the first time, Neville (and the audience) notices the tattoo of a butterfly on Anna's neck, and a look of realization plays across his face. Neville procures a vial of blood from the creature that he has cured, ushers Anna and Ethan into a protected enclosure, and hands her the vial of blood. "I think this is why you're here," Neville tells Anna. "What are you doing?" she asks. "I'm listening," he replies.

Like Matheson's novel, Lawrence's *I Am Legend* also engages with concepts of race, particularly through the introduction of Bob Marley and his music throughout the film. Neville frequently listens to or sings Marley's "Three Little Birds," and "Redemption Song" is played over the credits of the film. After Anna and Neville meet, Neville discloses to Anna that his daughter was named in honor of the singer. When she professes to have no knowledge of him, Neville launches into an explanation of Marley and his work. Specifically, he notes that Marley had "kind of a virologist idea. He believed that you could cure racism and hate – literally cure it – by injecting music and love into people's lives." When Marley was gunned down at a peace rally, he appeared at a concert two days later. Neville claims he

said, “The people, who were trying to make this world worse... are not taking a day off. How can I? Light up the darkness.” The fact that the infected are known to Neville as “dark-seekers,” serves to connect the violent creatures with the violent racists who rejected Marley’s message and gunned him down. At the end of the movie, Anna proclaims in a somber voiceover:

In 2009, a deadly virus burned through our civilization, pushing humankind to the edge of extinction. Dr. Robert Neville dedicated his life to the discovery of a cure and the restoration of humanity. On September 9th, 2012 at approximately 8:49 p.m. he discovered that cure. And at 8:52 he gave his life to defend it. We are his legacy. This is his legend. Light up the darkness.

Again, this connects the actions of Neville to the actions of Marley. Just like Marley (a “kind of virologist”), Neville (an actual virologist) has found an injectable cure for those who hide in the dark. The peaceful, multi-ethnic inhabitants of the survivor’s colony are his “legacy.”

While Lawrence’s intentions were likely good, the attempt at post-racial dialogue has met with significant critique by scholars. These critiques have most significantly revolved around black-white racial dichotomies.²⁵ It is perhaps Claire Sisco King who puts it most simply: “*I Am Legend* implies that it might inject hope and love into the lives of its audience as an antidote to racism and xenophobia, but the film offers no critical attention to its participation in the ongoing politics of Othering. In fact, this promise operates as a cover for the film’s reinscription of racist logics.”²⁶

Ground Zero

While I believe these critiques of the racial message of the film are insightful and rigorous, they have primarily focused upon black-white racial dichotomies. However, there is another form of racism and xenophobia that the film participates in. I speak specifically of the construction of Islam and its practitioners as a racialized enemy. While Lawrence's original intention may have been to depict the monsters of the film as lingering racist elements in the US, I will now show that through the invocation of 9/11, the film instead succeeds in depicting the dark-seekers as radical Islamic terrorists. To begin, I will articulate the 9/11 imagery used within the film.

First, as several scholars have noted, *I Am Legend* is intimately tied to 9/11 and the Bush presidency. Claire Sisco King notes that *I Am Legend* bears the mark of post-9/11 trauma, a trauma that is read as an emasculation of the nation which Neville is attempting to reverse through his actions. Steffen Hantke has argued that *I Am Legend* is “a key text of the final period of the Bush years”²⁷ and thus “on the right of the political spectrum.”²⁸ Eunju Hwang notes that the dark-seekers of the film represent the “stateless people” within the borders of the United States created by homeland security.²⁹

There are several obvious ways in which the film connects itself to 9/11. First, while Matheson's book, *The Last Man on Earth*, and *The Omega Man* all take place in California, *I Am Legend* takes place entirely in Manhattan. That Manhattan is tied inseparably to the 9/11 tragedy is evinced by Neville's repeated statement,

almost a mantra, throughout the film: “This is Ground Zero. This is my site. I can fix this.” Through the invocation of Ground Zero and references to “my site,” the film builds a significant association between Manhattan ravaged by the Krippin virus and Manhattan ravaged by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, both sites that beg “solutions” to the American viewer.

The film also makes real the America that Bush envisioned in his post-9/11 speeches. First, there is a close focus on the military as the means “to protect our citizens and strengthen our Nation against the ongoing threat of another attack.”³⁰ Mirroring this, Neville is a military doctor. Similarly, we see Neville maintaining a strong regimen of physical fitness and making use of a veritable arsenal of high-tech weapons and medical equipment because “our men and women in uniform deserve the best weapons, the best equipment, [and] the best training.”³¹ As Hantke points out, in contrast to Matheson’s novel and its previous adaptations, Francis Lawrence’s *I Am Legend* is the only film in which Neville is not constantly under siege. Rather, the careful covering of his tracks and the perimeter traps that surround his home invoke the “dreaded scenario conjured up by George W. Bush in his repeated assertion that the war on terrorism must be fought globally, because if we don’t fight them ‘over there,’ they will surely follow us home.”³² Eventually, the dark-seekers do assault Neville’s home, an assault presaged by Neville’s fearful statement: “They followed us home.” More than that, the colony at the end of the movie is safe because it has all the elements of “Main Street USA” that Neville lacks: gates to keep out the unwanted, guns to protect its citizenry, family life to

provide a sense of belonging, and a church to orient its citizens towards moral rightness.

Moreover, the colony is also a return to an idyllic America. Hantke notes that the safe space in the film is described as a “colony” in “New England,” hearkening back to America’s colonial past.³³ Similarly, while there are no religious locations throughout Manhattan in the film, the survivor’s colony is dominated by a traditional white-steeple church whose bell begins to ring just as the gates open. Anna and Ethan appear to walk towards the church as the movie comes to a close, Anna smiling at what she sees and only stopping to deliver the Christologically-significant blood into a pair of disembodied hands.

A Preponderance of Associations

Yet, it is this combination of Christian religious symbolism and 9/11 imagery that not only further complicates the post-racial dialogue of the film but which also offers an even darker twist to the film’s message. I begin with the dark-seekers, the hybrid zombie-vampire creatures that stalk the night of *I Am Legend*. Since they are a hybrid creature, I will analyze both “halves.” First, it is a difficult intellectual move to have zombies represent racists as *I Am Legend* hopes to do, particularly because zombies have been so good at representing oppressed and underprivileged groups in film. From early films such as *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) drawing connections between the zombie-state and slavery to Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) being inspired by Matheson’s *I Am*

Legend (whose racial elements have already been discussed), zombie films have tended to frame zombies as exploited groups rather than those who exploit. This tends to be true of vampire media as well: From the titular character of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) bearing stereotypical Jewish traits to the vampires of *True Blood* (2008) standing in for gay Americans, regardless of whether they are protagonists or antagonists, the character of the vampire tends to refer back to a subjugated population rather than their subjugators.

Conversely, both monsters have been excellent at representing the threat of terrorism in post-9/11 American film. Kevin Wetmore has argued that "Zombification represents a loss of Self, a loss of social self and a loss of all relationships that existed with that person. Similarly, Zombies cannot be reasoned with, cannot be negotiated with, they seek only to replicate themselves, which also makes them an excellent metaphor for terrorists."³⁴ In his analysis of *Dawn of the Dead* (2011) he points out that the opening credits link "zombies with praying Muslims and Middle Eastern mobs"³⁵ and that the actions of the survivors in the mall reflect a critique of American policy in post-9/11 Iraq.³⁶ Moreover, there are several films that "speak for themselves" regarding the connection between zombies and terrorism, including *ZMD: Zombies of Mass Destruction* (2009) which features terrorists releasing a biological weapon that causes zombification, *The Terror Experiment* (2010) in which a suicide bomber releases a zombie virus through his actions at a federal lab, and *Osombie* (2012) in which Osama bin Laden rises from the grave as a zombie (complete with other zombie terrorists).

Wetmore also points out that vampires have been used in certain films to the same effect. Citing such examples as the *Blade* sequels (*Blade II* (dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2002) and *Blade: Trinity* (dir. David S. Goyer, 2004)) and *Priest* (dir. Scott Stewart, 2011), Wetmore focuses the majority of his analysis upon *30 Days of Night* (dir. David Slade, 2007), which features vampires that appear on the surface to be human but "...are clearly not American. They look 'foreign'. They speak English, but clearly as a second language. They have their own language... They are outsiders, come to the United States to cause damage and fear.... This film presents the vampire as terrorist: they are not simply out to drink blood to survive. They are not sexy or aristocratic. They are out to destroy an entire American town."³⁷

I Am Legend uses many of the same tropes to define its dark-seekers. Like zombies, the mutated humans have no sense of self, no identity from before the change. As Neville notes in his audio logs, "social de-evolution appears complete. Typical human behavior is now entirely absent." Nor can the dark-seekers be reasoned or negotiated with; their rapid, shallow breathing and constantly quivering bodies betray a barely restrained violence that explodes into action whenever a human presence is felt. Their blood lust is simultaneously literal and figurative. Unlike Matheson's book and its other adaptations, the dark-seekers are incapable of producing and understanding language. Like the vampires from *30 Days of Night*, the dark-seekers could only be mistaken for human at a distance: no actors are used to represent the creatures which are ubiquitously rendered with CGI.³⁸

This theme of terrorism is further developed through the 9/11 language in the film. As previously noted, the film makes real Bush's vision for a post-9/11 America. However, the film also makes use of Bush's speeches in other ways. For instance, we hear very little of a presidential speech (voiced by Pat Fraley) in the film, but when it is switched on as Neville attempts to evacuate his family, the voice begins, "make no mistake, my fellow Americans..." While "my fellow Americans" has been a stock-phrase of several American presidents, Bush is the president best known for "make no mistake."³⁹ Possibly its most notable and frequently quoted follow-up was in his September 11th speech at Barksdale Air Force Base: "Make no mistake: The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts." The "make no mistake" phrase connects the dark-seekers – the result of the infection that is no doubt the topic of the president's speech – to terrorist acts. As previously noted, Neville also uses the phrase "they followed us home" to denote the dark-seekers, while Bush used it of terrorists. Similarly, Bush stated on September 17th: "We will not allow ourselves to be terrorized by somebody who thinks they can hit and hide in some cave somewhere,"⁴⁰ a stratagem eerily reflected in the dark-seekers' hunt for Neville before returning to hide in the lightless, urban caves of Manhattan's ruined buildings.⁴¹

More disturbing is that the speech Neville delivers about Marley can also be interpreted in light of Bush's post-9/11 speeches. At its core, the Marley speech is about hatred and intolerance. In his September 20th, 2001 speech, Bush said, "This is not, however, just America's fight, and what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the

fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.”⁴² Thus, in the mindset laid out by Bush, the fight against terrorism is Marley’s fight as well: a fight against hatred, a fight against intolerance, a fight against evil. Neville and Anna’s call to “light up the darkness” is also a reflection of the language of American Exceptionalism that Bush uses in his speeches: “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.”⁴³

Thus, while the film attempts to use the dark-seekers to stand in for racists, viewers of the film in post-9/11 America are equally – if not more – inclined to read the monster as a terrorist threat. This terrorist threat is not only connected in contemporary America to extremist movements in Islam through popular media, but also through the statements of Bush and his advisors. After the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, Bush identified the perpetrators as those who

practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics, a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam. The terrorists' directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinctions among military and civilians, including women and children.⁴⁴

A few years later, Bush made some similar remarks:

Some call this evil Islamic radicalism. Others militant jihadism. Still, others Islamo-fascism. Whatever it's called, this ideology is very different from the religion of Islam. This form of radicalism exploits Islam to serve a violent political vision: the establishment, by terrorism and subversion and insurgency, of a totalitarian empire that denies all political and religious freedom.⁴⁵

However, while Bush was cautious to create a separation between the greater body of Islamic adherents and those who perpetrated terrorist attacks, some

under him were not so cautious. Wetmore notes that the Undersecretary of Defense, Lt. General William G. ‘Jerry’ Boykin, during the Bush administration gave a speech in which he claimed Islam was a “false religion created by the devil, and that, ‘The enemy is a spiritual enemy. He’s called the principality of darkness. The enemy is a guy called Satan.’”⁴⁶ Boykin also said of his fight against Osman Ali Otto, a Muslim warlord in Somalia: “I knew my God was bigger than his. I knew my God was a real God and his was an idol.”⁴⁷ Perhaps most notably, Boykin insisted in the same speech that Bush had been elected by the will of God to lead the nation to Christianity and defeat Islamic terrorism. Boykin’s speech gives God ontological heft: God is an actor who placed Bush in the White House to act on his behalf and lead the US back to its Christian roots. By contrast, Islamic terrorists – and for Boykin, all of Islam – are instead led by the Devil, placing them in direct confrontation with God and his representative on Earth: the United States.

While Boykin’s position is extreme, the thought that America is a special place that is beloved by God is clear from Bush’s various speeches.⁴⁸ Moreover, Bush did not shy from casting the “War on Terror” in religious terms: “We are standing with those who yearn for the liberty -- who yearn for liberty in the Middle East, because we understand that the desire for freedom is universal, written by the Almighty into the hearts of every man, woman and child on this Earth.”⁴⁹ In fact, Bush did not shy from associating the “War on Terror” with the greatest Christian/Muslim conflict of the Middle Ages: “This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while.”⁵⁰

Regardless of whether it is Neville dealing with a loss of faith over the attack of the dark-seekers or Americans dealing with a loss of faith over the 9/11 attacks, the message is the same: God still loves us. Of course, the “us” here is America and its allies, and while not necessarily an image that “re-masculinizes” America,⁵¹ it is a positive image of light and love amidst the “evil” that befell the US on 9/11.

On the flip side, God clearly does not love the dark-seekers/“the terrorists.” There is no theoretical middle ground presented by the film: either one is part of the idyllic, Christian, Main Street USA town at the end of the film or part of the bestial race of animalistic dark-seekers. One is either an “American” or a “terrorist.” The fate of the “terrorists” is clear: it is God’s will that they will eventually be wiped out by the sanguine cure created through Neville’s Christ-like sacrifice. Christianity becomes the “cure” for terrorism, a cure that could – particularly in light of comments such as Boykin’s and Bush’s – easily be mistaken as the “cure” for Islam, just as Christianity was once perceived as one of the “cures” for communism during the Cold War or for the perverted Christian doctrine of the Mansons. Islamic terrorism has come to occupy the “empty space” left behind in the intertext.

Conclusion

Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend* is a complex intertext of Matheson's novel and its two previous film adaptations. While the intention of the film appears to have been to depict racism as monstrous, the frequent invocation of 9/11 imagery throughout the film recodes the vampiric dark-seekers as radical Islamic terrorists. The film's inclusion of Christian elements further serves to enshrine an us/Christians vs. them/Muslim dichotomy present in post-9/11 America, a dichotomy that the film presents as "curable" through the spread of Christianity and the fall of Islam. In so doing, the film creates continuity between the Crusades, the religious wars of the Middle Ages, and the "War on Terror," in a manner akin to that created by the Bush administration. The film becomes a way to not only mourn America's 9/11 loss in theatres, but also to portray Neville's struggle against monsters of the film as a way to fix Ground Zero.

¹ Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (New York, NY: Tor Books, 2007), 167.

² Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 32.

³ The convoluted nature of this intertextuality is highlighted in the story of the film's production. Originally, two writers (John William and Joyce Hooper Corrington) began working on an adaptation of *The Omega Man*. This script was later adapted – rather substantially – by Mark Protosevich and Akiva Goldsman to reach its final form before filming. However, the original ending to the film – an ending that was directly indebted to Matheson's original novel – was declared commercially unsound by studio executives and a new ending was filmed in response to this critique (the ending was later added to DVDs and labeled the "alternate ending"). Thus, the final film received by the audience is an adaptation of an adaptation of an adaptation with an alternate ending. Since this intertext is only complicated further by additional features, I will be almost exclusively focusing on the theatrical release of the film, whose box office worth was \$585.3 million.

⁴ These sources will be discussed later but notably Sean Brayton, "The Racial Politics of Disaster and Dystopia in *I Am Legend*," *The Velvet Light Trap* 67 (2011), 66-76 and Eunju Hwang, "Stateless within the States: American Homeland Security after 9/11 and Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend*," *European Journal of American Studies* 10.2 (Summer 2015), 2-18.

⁵ This topic is investigated in more detail in Kathy Davis Patterson, "Echoes of *Dracula*: Racial Politics and the Failure of Segregated Spaces in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*," *Journal of Dracula Studies* 7 (2005), 19-27.

⁶ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 14.

⁷ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 92.

⁸ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 35.

⁹ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 113.

¹⁰ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 31-2.

¹¹ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 39.

¹² Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 167.

¹³ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 135.

¹⁴ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 115.

¹⁵ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 110.

¹⁶ No doubt the underlying Judeo-Christian elements of the piece are enhanced by casting Heston, a man who most American viewers recognize as "Moses" from *The Ten Commandments* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1956).

¹⁷ Justin J. Roberts, "Transforming the Hero of *I Am Legend*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 44.1 (2016): 44.

¹⁸ Roberts, "Transforming the Hero of *I Am Legend*," 45.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Haas, Terry Christensen, and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 360.

²⁰ Gerry Carlin and Mark Jones, "Cease to Exist: Manson Family Movies and Mysticism," in *Holy Terror: Understanding Religion and Violence in Popular Culture*, edited by Eric S. Christianson and Christopher Partridge (London: Equinox, 2010), 61-62.

²¹ Dianne Kirby, "The Cold War, the Hegemony of the United States, and the Golden Age of Christian Democracy," in *Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities c.1914-c.2000*, edited by Hugh McLeod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 286.

²² The choice to cast Smith is an interesting one. As previously noted, the protagonist of Matheson's novel is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, English/German man. It may be that the choice to cast Smith is a racial inversion, a means of foregrounding the racial conflict that I suggest at the end of this section might have been Lawrence's original intention. However, as Janani Subramanian points out, the film makes use of Smith's "star power... [which] depends on the circulation of 'safe' black imagery as commodity" ("Alienating Identification: Black Identity in *The Brother from Another Planet* and *I Am Legend*," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 3.1 (2010), 53). Furthermore, as one reviewer of this article pointed out, Smith

does many things in the film that code “white” in cinema, such as playing golf and being a military doctor. This further complicates the attempt of the film at a “colorless” America, which makes Smith’s Neville “unable to resolve the contradictions to which he gives rise” (Subramanian, “Alienating Identification,” 45).

²³ This is not to say that I disagree with Ximena Gallardo C., “Aliens, Cyborgs and Other Invisible Men: Hollywood’s Solutions to the Black ‘Problem’ in SF Cinema,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 6.2 (2013): 219–51 about the black main character not having a part in the final salvation of the film, only to note that the origin of the cure is Neville’s own immunity found within his blood and then filtered through his dark-seeker test subject.

²⁴ It is noteworthy that this phrase was part of the marketing campaign for the film as well, with people encouraged to share stories about how God hasn’t forsaken humanity on the eponymous godstilllovesus.org. Also notable for my argument here is that the site was only later connected to the film and originally only provided a platform for people to share their personal revelations.

²⁵ See for instance Gretchen Bakke, “Dead White Men: An Essay on the Changing Dynamics of Race in US Action Cinema,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 83.2 (2010), 400–428; Brayton, “The Racial Politics of Disaster and Dystopia in *I Am Legend*,” and Gallardo C., “Aliens, Cyborgs and Other Invisible Men.”

²⁶ Claire Sisco King, *Washed in Blood: Male Sacrifice, Trauma, and the Cinema* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 159.

²⁷ Stephen Hantke, “Historicizing the Bush Years: Politics, Horror Film, and Francis Lawrence’s *I Am Legend*,” in *Horror After 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 166.

²⁸ Hantke, “Historicizing the Bush Years,” 172.

²⁹ Hwang, “Stateless within the State,” 4.

³⁰ George W. Bush, “George W. Bush: Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” *The American Presidency Project*, January 29, 2002. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29644>. Accessed on June 21, 2016.

³¹ Bush, “George W. Bush: Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union.”

³² Hantke, “Historicizing the Bush Years,” 169.

³³ Hantke, “Historicizing the Bush Years,” 166-67.

³⁴ Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 160.

³⁵ Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*, 160.

³⁶ Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*, 163.

³⁷ Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*, 165-66.

³⁸ Some readers may take issue with the lack of racialized traits among the dark-seekers (i.e. that the dark-seekers carry no recognizable physical markers of “Arabness”). However, this is unproblematic for two reasons. First, several of the films already discussed (especially the *Blade* series) carry no physical markers of identification that allow the monstrous antagonists of the film to be associated with terrorism. Rather, it

is entirely behavioral and verbal: the vampires of the films behave and speak in a manner that is alien to the watcher. As I have already noted, *I Am Legend's* dark-seekers behave in a similar manner to what Americans have been conditioned to anticipate of radical Islamic terrorists: monsters that search after a reason for violence, cannot to be reasoned with, and retain no recognizable sense of identity. Second, and more importantly, one cannot expect that Lawrence would have built such markers into his film. It is not Lawrence who purposefully crafts the dark-seekers as terrorists, but rather the audience that unintentionally creates the image out of the patchwork of 9/11 similitudes, Bush Presidency references, and the zeitgeist of the 2000s.

³⁹ Indeed, several popular news articles have made light of this Bushism, including David Brooks, "Make No Mistake," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2004. http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/21/opinion/make-no-mistake.html?_r=0. Accessed on August 11, 2016 and Debra Merskin, "The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush," *Mass Communication and Society* 7.2 (2004), 157–75.

⁴⁰ George W. Bush, "George W. Bush: Remarks to Employees in the Pentagon and an Exchange with Reporters in Arlington, Virginia." *The American Presidency Project*, September 17, 2001. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65079>. Accessed on June 24, 2016.

⁴¹ King, *Washed in Blood: Male Sacrifice, Trauma, and the Cinema*, 153.

⁴² George W. Bush, "George W. Bush: Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11," *The American Presidency Project*, September 20, 2001. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=64731>. Accessed on June 24, 2016.

⁴³ George W. Bush, "George W. Bush: Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks," *The American Presidency Project*, September 11, 2001. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58057>. Accessed on June 21, 2016.

⁴⁴ Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11."

⁴⁵ George W. Bush, "President Bush's Speech." *The New York Times*, October 6, 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/06/politics/president-bushs-speech.html>. Accessed on June 30, 2016.

⁴⁶ Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*, 138.

⁴⁷ Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*, 138.

⁴⁸ Examples include "Tonight I ask for your prayers for all those who grieve, for the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened. And I pray they will be comforted by a power greater than any of us, spoken through the ages in Psalm 23: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me'" (Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks."); "All of America was touched, on the evening of the tragedy, to see Republicans and Democrats joined together on the steps of this Capitol, singing 'God Bless America'; and "In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom, and may He watch over the United States of America" (Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union").

⁴⁹ George W. Bush, "President Bush Discusses Global War on Terror." *The White House - President George W. Bush*, November 1, 2007. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/11/20071101-4.html>. Accessed on August 7, 2016.

⁵⁰ George W. Bush, "President: Today We Mourned, Tomorrow We Work." *The White House - President George W. Bush*, September 16, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>. Accessed on August 7, 2016.

⁵¹ For 9/11 as emasculating event, see King, *Washed in Blood*.

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