

A Dead New World: Richard Matheson and the Modern Zombie

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Under the old government man exploited man, but since the
revolution it's the other way around.

RALPH FIENNES in *Land of the Blind* (2006)

The only society more frightful than one run by children . . . might
be one run by childish adults.

PAUL SHEPARD, *Nature and Madness* (1992)

He laughed at his earlier idealism, his schoolboy vision of a brave new
world in which justice would reign and men would be brothers.

ÉMILE ZOLA, *Germinal* (1885)

My route to the study of zombies was circuitous, but essentially it was very much the same one that the famed zombie auteur George A. Romero took: we were both big fans of Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*. That Romero took his inspiration for the walking dead from Matheson's 1954 novel and the subsequent film based on it (*The Last Man on Earth*, 1964) is a well-documented bit of cinema lore. Other than generally acknowledging Romero's indebtedness to Matheson, however, few writers have probed this connection beyond assuming that it begins and ends with the obvious visual cues of the shuffling, blank-eyed dead banging on the windows and doors of a house, trying to get in and eat the inhabitants.¹ The living dead in question were not even zombies originally: Matheson writes of vampires and Romero originally called them "ghouls."² Regardless, the stiff shambling and insistent hunger of altered corpses stalking humans became an iconic representation of modern zombie fiction and film, one that has continued to evolve.

In interview after interview Romero maintains that he was especially interested in Matheson's representation of one civilization replacing another, and this is perhaps the more significant and ideological debt that Romero channels into his films, that of "a new society coming in and devouring the old."³ This apocalyptic version of "the more things change,

the more they stay the same” is the extremist theme that runs through both the novel *I Am Legend* and the film *Night of the Living Dead*—that of social and political structures “enduring in the afterlife of [their] chaotic implosion.”²⁴ It may sound counterintuitive to suggest that a return to the same actually represents a revolutionary—perhaps even *evolutionary*—change, but what I argue in this essay is that because we as the audience identify with the living human subjects, we never step back far enough to see the larger implications of either a vampire plague or a zombie apocalypse.

In Matheson’s novel, the audience is focused on Robert Neville as the lone survivor, the last human on earth, and we tend to read the novel as apocalyptic because we see the destruction of human society down to its very last member. Un fortunately—and this is where the 2007 film version of *I Am Legend* gets it completely wrong—Robert Neville is not *legend* because he represents human society, nor because he somehow saves humanity; Robert Neville is legend because he is the single largest threat to a *new society*, one that has superseded humanity. Society has evolved beyond humanity, mutating to accommodate a new life-form that both is and is not identifiably human, which proves most clearly that it is our definition and even prioritization of *humanity* that has been flawed from the outset. This is where I see Matheson’s and Romero’s texts engaging with the humanist/post-humanist debate most directly, as they both offer examples of vastly transformed human landscapes wherein that change is, as Katherine Hayles has often suggested, both nightmarish *and* liberating.²⁵ Further, as Nell Badmington suggests, “apocalyptic accounts of the end of ‘Man’ . . . ignore humanism’s capacity for regeneration and, quite literally, recapitulation,”²⁶ leading unwary spectators to focus solely on the restoration of the human status quo rather than considering the potential for advancement in both mind and body that are often the focus of post-humanist considerations. If we are to consider whether the zombie is or can be representative of the post-human state, we must first purge ourselves of the very binaries that defined the old Cartesian model. If zombies are both alive and dead,²⁷ if they retain portions of both mind and body, then they force us to rethink the foundational philosophies that have informed our interactions with birth, life, death, and the hereafter.

Robert Pepperell in his book *The Post-Human Condition* uses the term “post-human” in a variety of contexts: (1) to designate an end to the era of social theory dubbed humanism, (2) to indicate that our conceptual construction of what it means to be *human* is undergoing a profound transformation, and (3) to account for the conflation of emerging technologies

that “show that the balance of power between humans and machines is altering.”²⁸ The first of those contexts is problematic, because, as a number of scholars have convincingly countered, anything saddled with a “post” in its name is irretrievably caught up in whatever it is that it is “posting,”²⁹ so it becomes nearly impossible to discuss *post*-humanism without engaging in a discussion of the relative pros and cons of *humanism*. Meanwhile, Pepperell’s third context focuses on the nexus of the organic and the technological. Robotics, prosthetics, and even neural networks aside, once one engages with the concept of nanotechnology—of *living machines*—it becomes even more difficult to ignore the specter of humanism, which could prioritize the organic transformation of *machines into humans* as evidence of human superiority. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, compellingly warns against the dangers of apocalyptic or “complacent” post-humanism, arguing that in a scenario based on the death or replacement of humans we should beware the “grafting of the posthuman onto a liberal humanist view of the self.”³⁰ The Syfy channel’s series *Battlestar Galactica* appears to be traveling down this path, but while I think it’s a fascinating issue worthy of further examination, it isn’t the one I want to explore here. It is specifically Pepperell’s second context of the word post-human—the profound transformation of humanity’s conceptual definition of itself—that I am interested in applying to the *dead/Other* rather than the technological/Other, to consider whether “reading the zombie as an ontic/hauntic object”³¹ reveals our own denial of that which is *inhuman* in all of us. Thus I begin my examination of both the vampire and the zombie, Matheson and Romero, with a brief look at an alien.

In “Pod Almighty!; or, Humanism, Posthumanism, and the Strange Case of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*,” Neil Badmington focuses on the scene in Don Siegel’s 1956 movie where the protagonist, Miles Bennell, has a confrontation of sorts with the “people” growing inside the four pods beside his greenhouse. There are two significant ideas proffered in this scene: the first is that when the pods are first discovered discharging their vaguely human contents, Miles is restrained from destroying them by Jack, who insists that they don’t pose any danger until they are fully formed. This seems like a definite shout-at-the-screen moment because the viewers already know that those four pods have given birth to alien replicas of the two men and two women, replicas who will then dispose of their human counterparts. One could argue that the best time, in fact, to destroy them is *before they are fully formed*, but no one seems ready to destroy something that is *vaguely*, or perhaps *potentially*, human. When

Jack returns to the greenhouse alone a short time later, however, four shapes are now distinctly recognizable as Miles, Becky, Jack, and Teddy. Herein lies the conflict, because while Miles destroys his own replica with nary a second thought, he simply cannot bring himself to destroy an alien body with Becky's face. He knows it is not Becky—it is even a threat to Becky—but he cannot destroy that which he identifies as/with his lover. This moment of alien/human catexis is what prompts Badmington to argue that this scene delineates the “invasion” of post-humanism into humanism; more specifically, he argues:

Because the alien reminds him of Becky, Miles cannot avoid acting as if it she were the true object of his desire. His uniquely human feelings for Becky lead him to place her in a position which threatens her very existence, her very future as a human being. Although “[s]exuality and sexual difference,” as Cindy Hendershot has pointed out, “are the measures of humanity in the film,” it would seem that they are at once the measures of posthumanism. To be human is to desire, to possess emotions; but to desire is to trouble the sacred distinction between the human and the inhuman. Miles loves Becky, but Miles also appears to love an alien legume. Humanism has been invaded by posthumanism.¹²

Ultimately, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* upholds basic humanism by maintaining the pretext that there is some ineffable human quality that cannot be copied or reproduced, thus forever demarcating the line between human and nonhuman. As Badmington suggests, however, “A seemingly straightforward humanism secretes its own alternative,”¹³ or as Pepprell more stridently argues, “No finite division can be drawn between the environment, the body and the brain. The human is identifiable, but not definable.”¹⁴ This latter sentiment returns us to the second context of Pepprell's use of the word post-human that I acknowledged previously—the profound transformation of humanity's conceptual definition of itself—because there is also a way of interpreting Miles's reluctance to destroy *the body* of the alien Becky as indicative of a reluctance to recognize or acknowledge the Cartesian mind/body separation at the heart of traditional humanism. To borrow loosely from Donna Haraway's “A Cyborg Manifesto,” if “there is nothing about being female that naturally binds women together into a unified category,” and even the status of “being” female is “itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices,”¹⁵ then can we not consider whether there can be a unified category called *human*—and if so what, then, are those unifying characteristics, because Descartes's old mantra of

“I think, therefore I am” seems woefully solipsistic in light of today's scientific and technological advances. This, of course, is too voluminous a topic to be adequately addressed here, but I would like to borrow a bit from the psychological dualism implicit in determining *self*-identification and negation, or that which is me and that which is not me. This is what the zombie incarnates: our discomfort with that boundary space that exists in us all, that objectness of our inherent material makeup whereby we transition from human to post-(as in no longer)-human.

Matheson's I Am Legend and the Problem of Identification

In 1954, just nine years after the Trinity Test,¹⁶ Richard Matheson published his novel *I Am Legend*—with the guiding premise that the human race was doomed to extinction. In the novel, widespread use of bombs causes a viral pandemic that virtually wipes out all traces of humanity on earth; the resulting apocalypse leaves Robert Neville as the sole surviving human engaged in a continuous battle against hordes of Darwinian mutants: a vampiric, photosensitive group of undead, driven by an instinctual desire to feed on human blood. Of course, texts like Matheson's make the distinction between living, dead, and “undead” harder to demarcate, especially when a plethora of film adaptations have interpreted these creatures differently—from the shambling ghouls of *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) to the white-haired technophobes of *The Omega Man* (1971) to the red-eyed “Darkseekers” of *I Am Legend* (2007). The creatures were even still called vampires in *The Last Man on Earth*, but as Peter Dendle has noted, we “know a zombie when we see one.”¹⁷ Furthering the confusion is the fact that Matheson slowly reveals that there are, in fact, two kinds of vampires in his novel: one living and one dead. Thus normative categories are problematic, but this very variety reinforces Robert Pepprell's claim that “the human is identifiable, but not definable”;¹⁸ we identify the sameness of these creatures across a variety of interpretations, but we define them according to context rather than construct.

For the most part, both Neville's daily experiments on the sleeping undead and his nightly antagonism with the hordes outside his house are devoid of personal attachment—the dead/undead are anonymous and impersonal, with only two exceptions (to be discussed in more detail below).¹⁹ He reflects dispassionately on the “eleven—no, twelve children that afternoon”²⁰ that he had destroyed, and he tosses a young woman outside into the sunlight to die a painful, drawn-out death because he

wanted to see how long it would take. Neville is our touchstone in this apocalyptic landscape; he is our viewpoint and, as such, determines in large part the direction and scope of our understanding of this dead new world. Because Matheson strategically alternates scenes of Neville's brutal pursuit of the vampires with flashbacks of the life Neville had before the plague, readers are placed in a position where they identify with Neville's despondency and the wretchedness of having lost the very things that gave his life meaning. After both his wife and his daughter fall victim to the plague that has produced the vampires, Neville, and by extension the reader, regains some measure of meaning in the methodic destruction of what we perceive as *the enemy*. More important, Matheson's narrative maneuvers allow us to identify with the man that Neville once was and to imagine how we might react to the traumatic circumstances that transform him into what he becomes.²¹

Robert Neville was once a conscientious citizen, one who obeyed the dictates of law and order; when his daughter, Kathy, succumbs to the spreading plague, Neville takes her to the appointed place where her body can be safely dealt with, thus preventing the further spread of the plague. What he doesn't know then is that this place of disposal is nothing more than a huge fire pit where the bodies of the infected are burned indiscriminately. The reader cringes when the full horror of what will happen dawns on Neville: "The great fire crackling, roaring yellow, sending its dense and grease-thick clouds into the sky. Kathy's tiny body in his arms. The man coming up and snatching her away as if he were taking a bundle of rags. The man lunging into the dark mist carrying his baby. Him standing there while the pile driver blows of horror drove him down with their impact."²² Few of us can comprehend the pain of losing a child, much less the horror of watching that child immolated in the depersonalizing conflagration of a mass fire pit. For a man still grieving the death of his beloved daughter to be complicit in the utter destruction of her remains becomes a moment of transformation for Neville. When the time comes for Neville to dispose of his wife's remains, he cannot bring himself to consign her as well to "a bonfire a hundred yards square, a hundred feet deep."²³ All societal recognition of death as an emotional, symbolic event has been superseded by mass fear of infection: morticians are banned from performing their body preservation services, cemeteries are barred and guarded, "men had been shot trying to bury their loved ones."²⁴ The body, post-death, has become a liability that neither society nor the individual can afford to treat sentimentally. Logically, the body is no longer a symbolic representation of the life that was once housed there, and instead

represents a highly contagious source of infection, but Neville refuses to recognize the mandates of reason and medicine. As he secretly buries his wife in an out-of-the-way, high-weeded lot, Neville works swiftly—not out of fear that he will pay the consequences, but out of fear that Virginia will: "If he was seen they would come out and get him. Being shot was nothing. But she would be burned then. His lips tightened. No."²⁵ The corporeal remains of his wife represent not simply the person it was once, but also Neville's own ability (and inability) to recognize himself: "Time was caught on hooks and could not progress. Everything stood fixed. With Virginia, life and the world had shuddered to a halt."²⁶ For Neville, the destruction of Virginia's body is an idea so horrible that he acts against law and logic to prevent it, to preserve her body intact as a representation of life—the life they *used to have*. Unfortunately for Neville, symbols do not always retain their meaning, and the dead do not always stay buried.

Two days, or rather two nights, after he buries his wife's body, a sleepless Robert Neville is startled by the sound of someone turning the knob on the front door. In terms of time, this is way before it becomes necessary for Neville to fortify his home—on this night, the windows are open and the front door is unlocked, but at two in the morning he isn't expecting any visitors. In a scene reminiscent of Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, and I would hope recognizably similar to Badmington's example of the greenhouse scene in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Neville is forced to confront a revised and referential body that is both drastically altered—and thus unfamiliar—yet simultaneously and horrifically familiar:

He moved into the living room slowly, his heartbeat thudding heavily. The door rattled as another fist thudded against it weakly. He felt himself twitch at the sound. What's the matter? he thought. The door is open. From the open window a cold breeze blew across his face. The darkness drew him to the door. "Who . . ." he murmured, unable to go on. His hand recoiled from the doorknob as it turned under his fingers. With one step he backed into the wall and stood there breathing harshly, his widened eyes staring. Nothing happened. He stood there holding himself rigidly. Then his breath was snuffed. Someone was mumbling on the porch, muttering words he couldn't hear. He braced himself, then, with a lunge, he jerked open the door and let the moonlight in. He couldn't even scream. He just stood rooted to the spot, staring dumbly at Virginia. "Rob . . . ert," she said.²⁷

Later in the story, in what is almost an aside, we learn that Neville's confrontation with she—who-is-not-his-wife has a violent end, that he is forced ultimately to destroy her body despite—even because of—what it

signifies for him. Even though her death from the plague represents a cessation, an end, where “everything stood fixed,” he acts to preserve her body in direct conflict with the old Cartesian model of mind/body separation, as if ensuring that her body remain intact will ensure that her essence remain intact. He is proved frighteningly correct in that enough of Virginia is intact to enable her to crawl her way out of a sewn-up blanket and several feet of earth, find her way back to the home she remembers, and even to call him by name. In the end, Neville’s failure to separate mind from body, memory from corpse, results in his having to destroy precisely what he had hoped to preserve. His memories now include his having to be the architect of Virginia’s final destruction—her second death.

Neville’s confrontation with the reality of Virginia’s death—and un-death—is demonstrably part of what causes his reversal from identification to negation; his lack of emotional involvement in his daily confrontations with the other vampires over the next ten years is the product of his having cut off the part of himself that cathects with the world around him. Everything is at his disposal; the malls, the libraries, the grocery stores are all completely open for his personal use, and he treats the vampires in much the same way—as depersonalized scapegoats for the release of his personal frustrations. This nihilistic viewpoint is challenged only by the appearance of a living dog, the named vampire Ben Cortman, and Ruth—a vampire who can walk about during the day.

The social bonds of friendship are distorted in *I Am Legend* so that rather than sustaining life, they become emblematic of its destruction—a connection that is made outside Robert Neville’s house every evening when his neighbor and friend Ben Cortland, now a vampire, stands on the front lawn and shouts for Neville to come out so that he can have him for dinner. Their former friendship transmutes into a kind of perverse game of hide-and-seek—Cortman harasses Neville on a nightly basis and Neville hunts for Cortman’s corpse daily: “It had become a relaxing hobby, hunting for Cortman; one of the few diversions left to him. . . . Neville felt certain that Cortman knew he was singled out for capture. He felt, further, that Cortman relished the peril of it. If the phrase were not such an obvious anachronism, Neville would have said that Ben Cortman had a zest for life. Sometimes he thought Ben Cortman was happier now than he ever had been before.”²⁸ The fact that Cortman is named, is *known* to Neville, makes him a kind of foil against which Neville thinks to measure his relative humanity, and while the reader is under the impression that Cortman is representative of all vampires it is easier to agree with Neville. But that binary understanding of vampire/human—dead/not-dead—is

most directly challenged when Neville encounters Ruth, who appears to be a human female walking about during the daytime. Readers, like Neville, are caught between their hopes that all is not lost—that this Adam and Eve scenario can repopulate Eden as we knew it—and fears that this is just another cruel twist of fate that Neville must endure as the last remnant of human life.

Dennis Giles has argued that a central theme of horror is the existence of “delayed, blocked, or partial vision,”²⁹ and in this case the revelation confutes the fatal flaw in Neville’s, and our, conceptions of humanity—of self and Other. Ruth represents the *other survivors* of the pandemic virus; the dust storms that infected everyone but Neville resulted in two separate mutations: the animated corpses we are familiar with, and a group of mutated humans who do not die but who suffer from side effects that result in our dismissive labeling of them as vampires. Neville, whose characteristic detachment toward the vampires he killed seemed so reasonable before, is now revealed to be singularly closed-minded; he had been indiscriminately killing those he considered the enemy, some of whom had been living beings engaged in an effort to restore order and rebuild society.

By the time Ruth makes an appearance, a new society has emerged, albeit a primarily nocturnal one, and steps have been taken to bring back a certain amount of order and communal responsibility. Unfortunately for Neville, he has become an impediment to the very social order he thought he was single-handedly maintaining. In the note that she leaves him after knocking him unconscious, Ruth explains:

When I was first given the job of spying on you, I had no feelings about your life. Because I *did* have a husband, Robert. You killed him. But now it’s different. I know now that you were just as much forced into your situation as we were into ours. We *are* infected. . . . What you don’t understand is that we’re going to stay alive. We’ve found a way to do that and we’re going to set up society again slowly and surely. We’re going to do away with all those wretched creatures whom death has cheated. And, even though I pray otherwise, we may decide to kill you and those like you.³⁰

As proof of what she says, Ruth leaves Neville one of the pills that she had been surreptitiously taking all the while she was with him: “a combination of defibrinated blood and a drug”³¹ that enables Ruth to fight her hunger for blood and survive in the daylight. The horrific truth overwhelms Neville as he realizes that what Ruth suggests is indeed possible: that a mutation in the bacteria could allow some of those infected to adapt and survive.

Matheson makes a concerted effort to show the relative humanity of some of the vampires alongside the increasing inhumanity of Robert Neville; the survivors of the pandemic virus that turns them into vampires actively rebuilding society, organizing a provisional government, forming a communications network, and establishing a military police force, one whose chief goal is the capture of the last human. Neville's failure to recognize his wife's transformation pales in retrospect as it becomes clear that he has failed to recognize his own too-narrowly-defined classification for humanity, and in his error he has been the agent of humanity's destruction. He has become the threat, the virus, the social contaminant that must be removed like a tumor before the social body can re-form and heal. Capturing and destroying Robert Neville has become the new society's foremost goal, and it becomes apparent to the readers that we have been identifying *humanity* within an outdated context; Neville has become the monster and the vampires have become representatives of the post-human.

Neville's final reflection in the novel is to realize "with an inward shock that he could not recognize in the rush of the moment . . . that he felt more deeply toward the vampires than he did toward their executioners."³² The differences between human and nonhuman, or rather post-human, conflate in the final scene of the novel as recognition comes too late to save Robert Neville.

George Romero's Night of the Living Dead and the Problem of Negation

Gregory Waller, in *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, marks the "modern" era of horror film as beginning in 1968 with George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*, calling prior films of the 1960s formulaic and safe, but crediting these two with redefining "the monstrous—thereby redefining the role of the hero and the victim as well—and [situating] horror in the everyday world of contemporary America."³³ Certainly, Romero's flesh-eating ghoulous defy whatever safety audiences may have expected from the film, replacing it with an "open-eyed detailing of human taboos, murder, and cannibalism."³⁴ In fact, I would argue that *Night of the Living Dead* is demonstrative of what the film critic Adam Lowenstein has called *stock horror*, or "the employment of graphic, visceral shock to access the historical substrate of traumatic experience."³⁵ Lowenstein combines the theorist Walter Benjamin's idea of the "dialectic of awakening"³⁶ with this concept

of shock horror, and theorizes that the "pain of . . . shock horror is the agony of awakening—to the body, and to history."³⁷ While Lowenstein was specifically discussing the films of Georges Franju,³⁸ I believe that Romero also intended to effect an *awakening*—to reflect the trauma of a nation suffering—and this interpretation is supported in a number of unexpected ways. The Museum of Modern Art was one of the first institutions to screen *Night of the Living Dead*, recognizing its cultural as well as historical value, and the installation grounded the film as follows:

Released at a time when disillusionment was running rampant in the country—spurred by the Vietnam War and the recent assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy—Americans identified with the film's most shocking suggestion: death is random and without purpose. No one dies for the greater good or to further the survival of others. Instead, people die to feed faceless, ordinary America. A metaphor for societal anxiety, the sight of America literally devouring itself and the representation of the desecration of the wholesome American family . . . served as a release for the country's repressed trauma.³⁹

Where I suggest *Night of the Living Dead* intersects with the issue of post-humanism is in an adaptation of Plato's theory of anamnesis—a process of remembrance or recollection of the past. Anamnesis, however, also has the medical application of referring to the body's response to a previously encountered antigen—a *remembrance* of that antigen that prompts a more focused physical response. Films, like zombie films, that project a flurry of events—even apocalyptic events—are by necessity utilizing recaptured, revised, restructured visions of the past—past anxiety, past trauma, past hysteria. They are a form of social vaccination that revisits the horror of disease or trauma in order to prepare the social body for some future contamination or event.

The spectacle of horror both familiarizes and distances the audience from the traumatic event depicted, seeming to depict something new but effectively redirecting the public's attention to past events from which they have become desensitized by repeated exposure.⁴⁰ Considered in this light, the depersonalization that is a characteristic of the zombie—bodies without souls—can be reconceived as a problem of identification, an unwillingness to recognize both similarity *and* difference. Robert Neville fails specifically to recognize the reality of his wife's physical transformation, but more universally he fails to differentiate the *living* vampires from the *dead* ones; he cannot overcome the differences manifested by the plague to identify the post-human state of the living vampires. The

ephemeral yet supposedly determining essence of humanity is just as difficult to distinguish in *Night of the Living Dead*.

In the opening scene, Johnny jokingly teases his sister by saying “They’re coming to get you, Barbara!,” but the joke is soon decidedly not funny as it becomes apparent that they are indeed coming to get them. When her brother falls victim to the graveyard zombie, Barbara flees in the car only to have to abandon it and seek the relative shelter of a nearby farmhouse. Inside, she finds a motley assortment of humans, including the home’s resident family, gathered inside for exactly the same reason. Barricading the doors and windows, the humans in *Night of the Living Dead* create for themselves a similar prison to the one Robert Neville existed in; the home becomes not a place of refuge so much as a place of confinement and restriction. Whereas *I Am Legend* takes place over several years, the events of *Night of the Living Dead* consist of just that—a single night. Thus the physical and cognitive interactions of the inmates become charged with a sense of immediacy, and the audience is swiftly engrossed in the struggle of the living against the forces of the dead.

But just like our eventual disillusionment with Robert Neville, humanity in *Night of the Living Dead* ultimately disappoints the audience and shrinks the ideological gap between themselves and the instinct-driven corpses that plague them. Those inside the marginal sanctuary of the house are as much a risk to each other as are the zombies hammering at the windows. Everything that was familiar has been inverted: familial bonds prove deadly for the Coopers, as they do for Barbara, because these figures cannot reconcile themselves to their loved ones becoming the *Other*. If the problem in *I Am Legend* was one of faulty or incomplete identification, in *Night of the Living Dead* it seems that the prevailing issue is rather a failure of negation; the characters fail to appropriately categorize the *difference* between themselves and the zombies, and thus fail to protect themselves. Barbara, though demonstrably passive through much of the film, seems to surrender entirely when she sees her brother Johnny—now a zombie—reaching through the door, giving herself over to him as if it were impossible to resist the familial bond between them. Mrs. Cooper quite nearly resigns herself to being eaten by her daughter—perhaps because she is simply too deep in denial about the changes wrought in her family, or perhaps she acts *despite* her recognition of her daughter’s transformation. Her perception of her own role as mother is paramount in either scenario; regardless of whether her daughter is still human, or even still *her daughter*, she conceives of herself as mother to the

recognizable form of her daughter and she cannot act contrary to this identification. Thus she cannot act to protect herself.

Neither love nor personal integrity offers any measure of protection, as the zombies themselves don’t care whether they are eating a “good” person or a “bad” person, someone’s sister or husband. Not even Tom and Judy are spared, despite our certainty that the young couple represent the transcendent hope of youth and love, and neither is Ben, arguably the strongest living character in the film—the one we think most likely to survive. The transformation of human into food arguably begins at death itself when, as Shakespeare most famously pointed out, the body becomes mere food for worms, but in *Night of the Living Dead* the natural order of the process is reversed, as the still living become food for the dead.

Traditionally, critiques of *Night of the Living Dead* have focused on its nihilism, its utter negation of humanity itself. As R. H. W. Dillard argues, “the plot is . . . one of simple negation, an orchestrated descent to death in which all efforts toward life fail,”⁴¹ demonstrating what the cultural critic Slavoj Žižek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*⁴² calls the United States’ deep psychological attachment to images of catastrophe. Certainly, the shocking portrayal of cannibalism, animated corpses, and the amount and specificity of gore displayed make *Night of the Living Dead* a radical narrative for its time, but more shocking, more frightening even is the way that the film systematically takes apart the constructs of social order and human value. Death is, from the very first frames, no longer a state of being that has meaning, as demonstrated by Johnny’s irreverence in the graveyard; conversely, if death no longer has value—sacred or otherwise—how are we to consider the value of life? Throughout the film, “the deaths . . . are all to no purpose; they do not finally serve the practical cause of survival, nor do they act to the enhancement of larger human value.”⁴³ Drawing from Giorgio Agamben’s concept of a permanent state of exception, Meghan Sutherland argues that “in [zombie films], death asserts its immanence in the living and life asserts its immanence in the dead,” thus death becomes a continuing state of being—a post-life existence that defies normative categories.⁴⁴ Dying itself has no purpose anymore, for those who die rise again as monstrous doppelgangers of their living selves.

Night of the Living Dead dramatizes the bewildering and uncanny transformation of human beings into nonhuman forms. Yet the most callous treatment of the human form is not the result of a zombie attack, at least not directly; Ben, weary and dispirited, sits visibly motionless at daybreak

as the local sheriff and his men approach the house, indiscriminately killing all the zombies in their path. Our survivor, Ben, is no longer recognizable as human, and he is shot and killed by the sheriff. Whether one chooses to see this final act as the result of racism—Ben was an African American actor cast in a leading role in the late 1960s—or indicative of a far more universal blindness or apathy, the notion that there is ultimately no discernible difference between the living and the dead suggests that the corpse of traditional humanism is as fluid and mobile as the walking corpses of the dead.

The chilling final scene of *Night of the Living Dead*—where the bodies of the first zombie we saw on-screen and the last human to survive the night in the farmhouse are both shown being tossed into the fire by the sheriff and his men—demonstrates most clearly the flaws of human judgment and its inability to discern its own capacity for inhuman behavior. In both *I Am Legend* and *Night of the Living Dead*, the surviving human is sacrificed because he represents a body that is simultaneously too similar and too different; Neville and Ben are social corpses, representative products of the “inherent and inseparable thing-character of human existence . . . not only our future but our present”⁴⁵ in that they exist in the state toward which we all advance with the same inexorable motion known as human life. Both Matheson and Romero pointedly direct our attention back to our own body politic and the weaknesses therein, and seem to ask us why, with the consequences of humanity’s *humanness* making themselves blatantly apparent all around us—global warming, resource depletion, warfare—is it so difficult to consider that we might all be, well, better off dead?

11. There is some confusion over whether the wives in the 2004 remake were robots or had implants.
12. Ksenych's story is included in *The Book of All Flesh*, edited by James Lowder, Eden Studies, 2001.
13. Clive Barker, "Sex, Death, and Starshine," *Mammoth Book of Zombies*, p. 31.

5. A DEAD NEW WORLD: RICHARD MATHESON AND THE MODERN ZOMBIE
Deborah Christie

1. To be clear, the visual similarities are prompted more by Sydney Salkow's 1964 film version, starring Vincent Price. In later film adaptations like *The Omega Man* (1971) with Charlton Heston and *I Am Legend* (2007) with Will Smith, as in Matheson's novel, the creatures can run quite fast and their complexion is merely pale. But in Salkow's film the hollow-eyed dead lurch and shamble with terrifyingly persistent slowness, and this is the recognizable image that Romero borrows for *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).
2. According to Romero, "I didn't call them zombies in the original film, you know? I didn't even think of calling them zombies. Back then, zombies were those guys in the Caribbean doing werwork, so I called them flesh eaters or ghouls, or whatever. And it's only after people started to write about the film that they were referred to as zombies, and I thought, well, maybe they are! I don't know. I guess that I created the dead neighbor [laughs]." Balfour, Brad. "George A. Romero Relives His Zombies through the *Diary of the Dead*." PopEntertainment.com. February 14, 2008, <http://www.popentertainment.com/romero.htm>.
3. Again according to Romero, "When we originally shot the *Night of the Living Dead* thing, there were three proposed causes, and we cut two of them out. . . . I don't want there to be a cause, it's just something that's happening, it's just a different deal, it's a different way of life. If you want to look at it as a revolution, a new society coming in and devouring the old, however you want to look at it. That's really my take on it, it doesn't matter. And people just don't communicate to get to the core of it all, they just have their own agendas or their own concerns . . . you know, Band Aids." Curnutte, Rick. "There's No Magic: A Conversation with George A. Romero." *Film Journal*. October 2004, <http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue10/romero.html>.
4. Sutherland, Meghan. "Rigor/Mortis: The Industrial Life of Style in American Zombie Cinema." *Framework*. Vol. 48, No. 1, Spring 2007, pg. 72.
5. This theme is present in much of Katherine Hayles's work, but she treats it most specifically in *Writing Machines* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) and *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

6. Badmington, Neil. "Theorizing Posthumanism." *Cultural Critique*. Vol. 53, No. 1, Winter 2003, pg. 11.
7. The relationship of the zombie to post-human theory has been addressed recently in a number of places: Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry's "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," in *boundary 2*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Spring 2008, engages specifically with post-human theory. Also, Martin Rogers's "Hybridity and Post-human Anxiety in *28 Days Later*" and Patricia MacCormack's "Zombies without Organs: Gender, Flesh, and Fissure" both appear in *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*, edited by Shawn McIntosh and Marc Leverette (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008). And, in dialogue with the kind of ontological discussions associated with post-human theory, though they don't mention it explicitly, see Larry Hauser's "Zombies, *Blade Runner*, and the Mind-Body Problem," and K. Silem Mohammad's "Zombies, Rest, and Motion: Spinoza and the Speed of Undeath," which mentions Deleuze and Guattari briefly. Both of these appear in *The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless*, edited by Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad (Chicago: Open Court, 2006).
8. Pepperell, Robert. *The Post-Human Condition: Consciousness beyond the Brain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, pg. 11.
9. Badmington. "Theorizing Posthumanism," pg. 11.
10. Hayles, Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybertics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, pg. 286–87.
11. Lauro and Embry. "Zombie Manifesto," pg. 87.
12. Badmington, Neil. "Pod Almighty!: or, Humanism, Posthumanism, and the Strange Case of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*." *Textual Practice*. Vol. 15, No. 1, March 2001, pg. 9.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 12.
14. Pepperell. *Post-Human Condition*, pg. 3.
15. Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991, pg. 155.
16. The Trinity Test was the first full-scale test of the atomic bomb conducted in the New Mexico desert near Los Alamos. Several eyewitness accounts—now declassified—can be viewed at <http://www.dannmen.com/decision/trin-eye.html> (U.S. National Archives, Record Group 227, OSRD-SI Committee, Box 82 folder 6, "Trinity").
17. Dendle, Peter. *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001, pg. 100.
18. Pepperell. *Post-Human Condition*, pg. 3.

19. The exceptions are his interactions with his former neighbor and friend, Ben Cortman, and his brief association with Ruth, the apparently human survivor who turns out to be a vampire.
20. Matheson, Richard. *I Am Legend*. New York: Tom Doherty, 1995, pg. 29.
21. I hate to spoil the ending for anyone who has yet to read *I Am Legend* but the final pages leave little doubt that Robert Neville has become a killer as prolific and indiscriminate as the plague of which he is a survivor.
22. Matheson. *I Am Legend*, pg. 70.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 73.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 74.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 75.
26. *Ibid.*, pg. 69.
27. *Ibid.*, pg. 77.
28. *Ibid.*, pg. 119.
29. Giles quoted in Waller, Gregory. "Introduction." In *American Horror Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*. Ed. Gregory Waller. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987, pg. 6.
30. Matheson. *I Am Legend*, pg. 154–55.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. 155.
32. *Ibid.*, pg. 44.
33. Waller, "Introduction," pg. 4.
34. Dillard, R. H. W. "Night of the Living Dead: It's Not Like Just a Wi That's Passing Through." In Waller. *American Horrors*, pg. 15.
35. Lowenstein, Adam. "Films without a Face: Shock Horror in the Cinema of Georges Franju." *Cinema Journal*. Vol. 37, No. 4, Summer 1998, pg. 37.
36. "Benjamin, like the Surrealists, believed the rapidly metamorphosing urban-industrial landscape simulates a mythic, enchanted dream state of consciousness. . . . [But he] wished to *transform* these dream images into dialectical images by exposing their historical content." *Ibid.*, pg. 48.
37. *Ibid.*, pg. 44.
38. In examining Georges Franju's film *Blood of the Beasts* (1949), Lowenstein probes the connection between horror and reality by focusing on the ways in which Franju intersperses a documentary-style montage of scenes from a slaughterhouse with the romantic lyrics of the Charles Trenet love song "La Mer," causing "the discrete elements of the song and the work [to] blur together, each infecting the other's presence to the point where the initial 'reality' of the workplace seems irrevocably altered." *Ibid.*, pg. 42.
39. MOMA Film Exhibition. "George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*." October 31, 2007. <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/films/565>.

6. Badmington, Neil. "Theorizing Posthumanism." *Cultural Critique*. Vol. 53, No. 1, Winter 2003, pg. 11.
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36. "Benjamin, like the Surrealists, believed the rapidly metamorphosing urban-industrial landscape simulates a mythic, enchanted dream state of consciousness. . . . [But he] wished to *transform* these dream images into diabolic images by exposing their historical content." *Ibid.* pg. 48.
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39. MOMA Film Exhibition. "George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*." October 31, 2007. <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/films/565>.

40. Ibid. pg. 46.
41. Dillard. "Night of the Living Dead." pg. 23.
42. Žižek, Slavoj. "Welcome to the Desert of the Real!" *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. Volume 101, Number 2, Spring 2002, pg. 385-389.
43. Ibid. pg. 27.
44. Sutherland. "Rigor/Mortis." 72.
45. Lauro and Embry. "Zombie Manifesto." pg. 101.

6. NUCLEAR DEATH AND RADICAL HOPE IN DAWN
OF THE DEAD AND ON THE BEACH
Nick Muntean

1. The selection of *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) instead of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) (which was made much closer to the time of *On the Beach*'s production in 1959) is due to the fact that, compared with the isolated zombie outbreaks in *Night of the Living Dead*, in *Dawn* the zombie hordes have swelled to truly apocalyptic numbers, and therefore constitute an overwhelming global antagonism much closer in spirit to the radioactive winds of *On the Beach*.
2. One can continue this argument, as I have elsewhere, that the 9/11 attacks engendered another epochal shift in the nature of the zombie form, as evidenced by the fast-moving, viral zombies of *28 Days Later* (2002).
3. Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001. p. 111.
4. Lifton, Robert Jay. *The Future of Immortality, and Other Essays for a Nuclear Age*. New York: Basic Books, 1987. p. 154.
5. Fromm, Erich. *The Sane Society*. New York: Owl Books/Henry Holt, 1955. p. 359.
6. Ibid. pp. 359-60.
7. Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. p. 61.
8. Freud, Sigmund. *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (1915-17)*. London: Hogarth Press, 1959. p. 16.
9. Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. New York: Norton, 1961. p. 11.
10. Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience*. p. 62.
11. Freud. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. p. 36.
12. Artaud, Antonin. "On Suicide." *Artaud Anthology*. New York: City Lights Books, 1965, p. 56.
13. In this way, it is almost as if the zombies are post-ideological sociopaths, as they bear an outward semblance of humanness but have no sense of morality, empathy, or any other definitively "human" qualities. Yet the sociopath, despite acting in accord only with the whims of his or her own id, ca

Better Off Dead

THE EVOLUTION OF THE
ZOMBIE AS POST-HUMAN

Edited by

DEBORAH CHRISTIE AND SARAH JULIET LAURO

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