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## TRAUMA, POST-APOCALYPTIC SCIENCE FICTION & THE POST-HUMAN

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with the idea of the “post-human” in cinematic science fiction and horror cinema through figures such as the zombie. Literally “undead”, such figures reveal a level of engagement with memories and possibilities of traumatic events at a social, cultural and political level. Hence, the deployment of such figures operates within specific historical and political junctures and cannot be read outside of specific spatial and temporal contexts. In this paper, I look at three films, Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2000), its sequel *28 Weeks Later* (2007) directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo and Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2006) which figure plotlines located in Britain. These recent films reveal a deep engagement with contemporary anxieties about terrorism, immigration and xenophobia. Through the deployment of horrific and spectacular imagery these films look at how the human body itself becomes the site of the political. Corporeal imagery in these films then becomes an allegory of both the “body-politic” and the human body as the site of political control and resistance. The work of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Hannah Arendt provides the basic theoretical frame through which I look at this angle of the “biopolitical” that is evoked in these films through dystopic and spectacular imagery of the “death” of the human and the production of the “post-human” subject.

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“As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.”—Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

### I

In this paper I take Foucault’s injunction from *The Order of Things* mentioned above in a slightly different direction. While Foucault talks about how “man” will disappear as a category of knowledge, my paper explores a literal manifestation of the post-humanist idea. By employing

awesome technologies of death and destruction that can extinguish and obliterate human life on a massive scale in a matter of seconds, the threat of an actual post-human era has appeared as a distinct possibility in our global imaginary especially after 1945. No wonder then that the traumatic realization of this possible apocalyptic reality has been the base of countless imaginative works in film and fiction. In this paper I will explore dystopic imaginaries of the post-human in contemporary post-apocalyptic, science-fiction and horror cinema, and the attendant political problematics and anxieties these liminal ontological states raise in the contemporary era. Zombies, mutants and other techno-cultural monstrosities often raise spectres of a Frankensteinish nightmare where a “new” species takes over human worlds in post-apocalyptic imaginaries. However, I claim that a specific genealogy of these “nightmarish” imaginaries sustain themselves on a level of repressed memories accruing from the images and narratives of traumatic events in modern history, like the Holocaust and Hiroshima. The proliferation of images of human subjects who were literally reduced to the status of the *living dead* (as was evidenced from the images that circulated after inmates were released from the death camps), I claim, are central for any understanding of these “nightmarish” imaginaries.

Also drawing from Walter Benjamin, I will look at the idea of catastrophe as central to an understanding of trauma in this sense—a catastrophic event being one that destabilizes the way in which we see the world, and leads to an “end” of the world as it is known and cognized. The catastrophe ruptures the continuum of time and liberates both positive (Benjamin’s evaluation of the time of revolution) and negative imaginaries oriented towards futurity. Drawing from the work of Adam Lowenstein, I would like to argue that within the genre of science fiction, there is a similar negative *catastrophic imagination* at play—one which mobilizes memory and the historical archive to speak about trauma and catastrophe in an allegorical way. I will extend the idea of historical trauma to include not only trauma of “past” events, but also traumatic events in the “present” that become “historical” via technological modes of representation. The idea of trauma and the post-apocalyptic imaginary then become more than mere fantasy and are raised to the level of historical allegory in the films that I examine.

Here, I would like to mention Ishiro Honda’s 1954 film *Godzilla* as a case of classic science-fiction/horror working as historical allegory. This film-text speaks about how the memory of a traumatic event is mobilized and allegorized in the “shocking representation” of a catastrophic event—in this case, the monstrous and destructive threat of annihilation through

atomic warfare and the mutated, post-human identities that accrue from this catastrophic event. Honda's film manages to "transfer onto Godzilla the role of the United States in order to symbolically re-enact a problematic United States-Japan relationship that includes atomic war, occupation, and thermo-nuclear tests" (Noriega, 1966: 61). But my prime focus is not on *Godzilla*. Rather, I will utilize insights from Noriega's reading of this film text to study three recent films—Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2000), its sequel *28 Weeks Later* (2007) directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo and Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006). I would like to push the argument about trauma and allegory through these post-apocalyptic, science-fiction films by pointing out that these three films, all located in Britain, suggest resonances of post-colonial dilemmas, race politics and the threat of war. I will limit my analysis to three concepts—the figure of the "living dead", the memory of the camps and the state of exception. I will suggest that these concepts work at the level of the allegorical— not merely in terms of evoking displaced meanings by means of reference, but also at the level of the Benjaminian notion of the *optical unconscious* which is central to the way in which film mobilizes historical allegory. Therefore, before going on to a discussion of the films, I will embark on a brief description of the relationship of allegory, "shocking representation" and the "optical unconscious" and see how these relate to the filmic evocation of horror and trauma with reference to displaced meanings.

## II

In his introduction to the book *Shocking Representation* (2005) Adam Lowenstein argues that generic tropes of the terrifying, the disgusting and the corporeal refer to particular traumatic referents. Implicit in his argument, is the idea that the archiving of the tortured and mutilated bodies of victims in the form of images in the last century's greatest catastrophes—the Second World War, the Hiroshima bombing and the Vietnam War—has been concurrent with the rise of cinema as a mode of historical representation. These images become what Laura Marks in her book *The Skin of the Film* (2000) calls *recollection-objects*, which bear the traces of the (catastrophic) past. Lodged in our consciousness, these images begin to form what Walter Benjamin calls the "optical unconscious".<sup>ii</sup> For Benjamin, the advent of technologies like photography brought the "optical unconscious" into play more than ever before. Minute moments of time which otherwise do not leave any trace on our perceptual world can be captured

through the click of the photographic/cinematic apparatus. Consciousness, in the Freudian schema, represents those moments of experience which leave an imprint on memory and can be narrativized in time. But the perceptual system is subjected to myriad experiences which do not enter the continuum of conscious experience. These unperceived (or dimly perceived) experiences sink into our unconscious. As was his wont, Benjamin took this schema and fused it with a technological-materialist viewpoint. Technologies like the still or the film camera make it possible to capture minute experiences which otherwise remain like a play of shadows on our conscious visual apparatus. The huge proliferation of visual culture in modernity means our stock of these images has proliferated manifold.<sup>iii</sup> Post-apocalyptic horror and science fiction cinema taps into this optical unconsciousness to refer back to the horrors of catastrophic events, by evoking the images of war, violence and destruction and reproducing the tortured corporeality thereof by means of oblique reference. This method and moment of reference is what Lowenstein calls the “allegorical moment”. One can relate this to Susan Sontag’s statement that “Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects of art. In science fiction films, disaster is rarely viewed intensively; it is always extensive. It is a matter of quantity and ingenuity. If you will, it is a question of scale.” (1965: 44)

I would like to argue that such imagination of disaster in post-apocalyptic science fiction/horror films does more than simply refer back to ‘past’ horrors. Rather, as Lowenstein argues in a very Benjaminian sense, they “blast open the continuum of history” (2005: 12) by means of “shocking representation”. Such representation allows these films to produce history in terms of “time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]” by seizing “hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”. (Benjamin, 1968: 257, 255). Therefore, the referent in such post-apocalyptic films need not exclusively be the past, but may also be the past conceived in terms of the present. In such films the allegorical moment’s “past” and “present” become compressed in the “immediate,” and this is made possible by modern technologies of representation such as photography, film and television which produce what “really is an instant history” (Nowell-Smith, 1990: 161). In the three films that are my focus, the “allegorical moment” thus works at two levels. First, they evoke the audience’s optical unconscious by referring back, either consciously or unconsciously to Britain’s colonial past and the related anxieties about the ‘other’ that originates in this past. Second, these films also evoke an “instant

history” through an imagination of disaster in the present, where, especially post-9/11, traumatic events become ‘historical’ by their mass accessibility and proliferation in terms of televised and filmed images. As Kyle William Bishop quotes:

Since the Second World War, for example, these key anxieties and horrors include “the fear of foreign otherness and monstrous invasion,” “the technological explosion,” “the rise of feminism, gay liberation, and African-American civil rights,” and “the heightened attack against Christian ideology and hierarchy as that which should ‘naturally’ define values and ethics in culture.

(2010: 26)

Here the notion of history becomes extended from the constricted, positivist framework of a linear and organic span of time. Rather here, as Benjamin says, the “past can be seized only as an image ... as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (1968: 255). “Past” and “present” therefore blur into each other in the production of historical meaning via hybrid temporal narratives.

### III

Danny Boyle’s 2002 film *28 Days Later* imagines the destruction of contemporary Britain after misguided animal rights activists accidentally unleash the “rage-virus” while trying to free chimpanzees at a biological research lab. The film actually begins with a montage of archival sequences of riot and violence from all over the world being played on a loop (including the public torture and murder of the last President of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, Mohammad Najibullah by the Taliban in 1996). It is revealed in a few moments that the images are actually being played on multiple television screens in the laboratory, and are hooked on in some way to a chimpanzee under examination. Thus, right at the beginning, a link is drawn between state power and violence on the one hand and corporeality on the other. The link of violence and state authority and its power of influence over human life features centrally in the Foucauldian notion of biopower—which essentially means the total regulation of the biological aspect of human life by means of political power (an instance would be regulations that seek to safeguard the health of the “population” such as regulations against the entry of people suffering from AIDS in many countries). For Foucault if the juridico-sovereign model of power presupposed rule over subjects, biopower entailed the governance of a statistically enumerable population conceptualized as a collective biological set.<sup>iv</sup> An essential function of

the seat of political authority then becomes the governance over “life” and by corollary the stalling of “death” to maximize the potential of “life”. “Life” and “death” in this sense are important tropes in *28 Days Later* where the event of an unimaginable catastrophe signals both the dislocation of biopower and the effort to reinstate it. They emerge as important tropes whereby the question of what is “human” and what is not becomes the central focus of the struggle for biopower—in other words, the prevention of “death” and its associated forms infiltrates the boundaries of “life” creating a scission between what must live and what must die. In the film, the infiltration of the animal rights activists and their efforts to free the chimpanzees from this protected domain of “life” leads to a series of infections resulting in the “death” of the human species. We are only shown the first of these infections inside the lab, not how it proliferates. But we are led to assume in the following sequence that the normal state of being has been destabilized by catastrophe. This is catastrophe in the Benjaminian sense of the term—something that causes an “end” of the world as it is cognized and experienced.

In *28 Days Later* we first experience the traumatic remembrance of this event through the eyes of its central protagonist Jim, played by Cillian Murphy. The manner in which Jim comes to encounter the effects of this event is crucial. It is revealed later that Jim had met with an accident which explains why he wakes up in a now-deserted hospital. Unaware of what has happened around him, Jim negotiates the space of the deserted hospital. One particular scene in the sequence speaks about the “scale” of the disaster—while Jim moves around the hospital trying to figure out what exactly has happened, he comes across a telephone counter with all the receivers hanging. Jim tries to use them but they don’t function anymore. Exasperated, he lets go of the receiver. Behind the swinging, non-functional telephone receivers shown through a low angle shot, is a Costa-Coffee (a popular chain of cafés) outlet. Effectively, this scene speaks of the ‘imagination’ of a disaster wherein all *normal, human* communications have ceased and the structures around which daily life revolved have disintegrated. If Jim’s initial shock in the hospital hinted at disaster, his foray outside into the city of London confirms it. The streets are devoid of human population and all activity has ceased. Several brass imitations of the Westminster Bridge and British flags lie strewn across the street as if symbolically signalling the “death” of the London that Jim once knew. The solitary figure negotiating the desolate space of the city hints at the great underlying fear of this century and the last, the fear of total annihilation of the human race—a fear made manifest by the destructive, near-apocalyptic experience of the

Second World War whose memories have become “cultural memories” encoded into man’s ontological being by technological modernity and its corollary methods of archiving. As Kyle William Bishop quotes in his book *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*:

Scenes depicting deserted metropolitan streets, abandoned human corpses, and gangs of lawless vigilantes have become more common than ever, appearing on the nightly news as often as on the movie screen. Because the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios depicted by zombie cinema, such images of death and destruction have all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded to more traditional horror films.

(2010: 11)

This leads us back to Sontag’s idea that such films “are not about science” but are “about disaster”. Disaster here does not merely mean the physical destruction of the world. It means *catastrophe* in the fullest Benjaminian sense of the term—a destabilization of the ontological and epistemological experience of the world as well.

Yet, the fear is not only one of annihilation. It is also the fear of invasion by the “other” and this is where the figure of the “zombie” or the “living dead” comes into the picture. The figure of the zombie is an allegorical one that has its roots in Haitian voodoo and its appropriation by cinema makes it “a complex and relevant cultural artifact, a fusion of elements from the “civilized” New World and mystical ancient Africa.”<sup>v</sup> Indeed, it is a creature born of slavery, oppression, and capitalist hegemony and in that way a manifestation of collective unconscious fears and taboos.” (Bishop 2010: 37)<sup>vi</sup> The “living dead” then becomes a trope whereby the discourse of race operates in subtle, but crucial ways. But the figure of the zombie or the living dead also functions at another, more explicitly political level and this is connected to the traumatic experience of the Holocaust. This is intricately connected to the question of sovereignty and what Giorgio Agamben calls the “state of exception”. The state of exception is an extreme situation where the law operates by being suspended (as in a military occupation within a democratic state—the AFSPA in the northeast and Kashmir in India are examples). If, as Foucault suggests through his notion of biopolitics that the function of the modern (nation) state is the regulation of all human life through political power, then the question of what is to be given the status of “life” and what is designated to the category of the “dead” also becomes a prerogative of the state. Thus, in effect, all modern states appropriate the “state of exception”

whereby the biopolitical state emerges as the sovereign arbitrator that decides what is *normal* and by corollary makes decisions over life and death. Thus, modern, biopolitical states function by blurring the boundaries between the fundamentally lawless “state of exception” and legitimate sovereign authority. Sovereignty, after all, is the right to decide on life and death. Biopower, which ostensibly makes a “benevolent” claim to governance, can appropriate this older right of rule by tipping over to what Agamben, in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), calls “thanatopolitics” (83). As Agamben quotes in *Homo Sacer* “When life and politics originally divided, and linked together by means of the no-man’s-land of the state of exception that is inhabited by bare life—begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception” (1998: 148). The figure of the ‘living dead’ therefore represents a liminal state of being that is within the boundaries of the political state, but is produced as a species of “bare life”—human life reduced to a pure biological counter and nothing more. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben talks of the “*Muselmann*” which was a term specifically applied to concentration camp inmates who were reduced to such a state of “bare life”.<sup>vii</sup> Quoting Wolfgang Sofsky, Agamben says that

The *Muselmann* embodies the anthropological meaning of absolute power in an especially radical form [...] Like the pile of corpses, the *Muselmann* document the total triumph of power over the human being”.

(1999: 47)

The figure of the living dead therefore also recalls the figure of the *Muselmann*.<sup>viii</sup> The images of the “living dead” in concentration camps have become a cultural artefact in our times, functionally and firmly lodged in our “optical consciousness” because of the archiving of the War years through photography and film. In certain senses therefore, the figure of the zombie marks a Freudian “return of the repressed”. Both of these discourses, the issue of race and the memory of the camps, inhere in the modern cinematic “living dead”. In *28 Days Later* the figure of the living dead therefore functions in two ways. At one level it addresses the post-colonial anxiety about the “other” and at another level it addresses the political anxiety about “bare life” that emanates from the state of exception.

Jim’s first encounter with the “living dead”, the “infected” as they are called in the film, happens right after the sequence where he is wandering around the streets of London. Jim enters a church where he sees a horde of “living dead” but he doesn’t know it yet. From afar, it looks like a pile of corpses and they look *almost* human. It is only when an infected priest begins to attack him that Jim realizes that he is not in “human” company anymore. The very fact that the

“living dead” here resemble the “human” but is outside of its definition by fact of their reduction to “bare life” is where the horror of *28 Days Later* emanates. This can also be seen as an allegory of same post 9/11 anxieties about terrorism and the cultural other and the “fear that anyone could be a suicide bomber or a hijacker” (and, I may add, a suspected perpetrator of bio-terror) which “parallels a common trope of zombie films, in which healthy people are zombified by contact with other zombies and become killers.” (Bishop, 55) The notion of “contact” has a two-fold resonance here. At one level it reveals the operations of the discourse of race in which the colonial “other” becomes something to be *seen* or *gazed at* but not to be *touched*—the other becomes at once an object of fascination on the one hand and fear and repulsion on the other. In such films “the terror comes from being turned into a zombie instead of being killed by one” (33) in much the same way that race marks out strict boundaries among the *human* and the *sub-human*. At the same time, the notion of contact is also connected to the notion of “contagion” which may be racial in nature but might also refer to contemporary traumas about pandemic infections. The “viral plague” as Bishop says is “most easily a reference to AIDS, but it could just as well reference cholera, smallpox, anthrax, or the avian or swine flues. In fact, in an unsettling irony, England experienced a devastating outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease during the filming of *28 Days Later*, resulting in the slaughter of millions of livestock.” (28) This is a case in which “the allegorical moment’s “past” and “present” become compressed in an “immediate” wherein anxieties about pandemics have become fuelled equally by the proliferation of disease due to mass movements of human population and the proliferation of ‘news’ about such pandemics which often leads to large scale panic—both being made possible modern advancements in technology. Jim’s initial encounter with such “living dead” is a moment of “shocking representation” wherein the possibility of such apocalyptic contagion is made apparent and possible by inserting into the till-now-desolate landscape, a hitherto unconceivable threat. This is a moment of *Jetztzeit*—a moment “filled by the presence of the now” in which the possibility of such an apocalyptic future is made possible by mobilizing the audience’s optical unconscious, their “memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”. By placing the *human present* and the *post-human nightmare* within the same frame, Boyle manages to create a sense of an apocalyptic possibility which is mediated by both past and contemporary knowledge of contagion, death and destruction. For example, as Bishop says:

The scene in which Jim picks up stray pound notes off the empty streets of London was directly inspired by

journalist footage from the “killing fields” of Cambodia during and after the reign of Pol Pot, and the street billboard displaying hundred of photos and notes seeking missing loved ones, which has such a direct tie to 9/11 now, was based on an actual street scene following a devastating earthquake in China. The abandoned city, overturned buses, and churches full of corpses were scenes all founded on existing moments of civil unrest and social collapse. (28)

The imagination of disaster, therefore is not mere fantasy. By stepping out of the sphere of “pure” horror to the realm of “science-fiction” *28 Days Later* makes us imagine that such a thing *could* happen. At the same time, by utilizing the optical unconscious and referring to past events by means of *optical* allegory, post-apocalyptic films such as *28 Days Later* drive home a point about the persistence of such horrific memories in the collective imagination. The imagination at play here is not merely an imagination of catastrophe, but a ‘traumatic imagination’ in which there is “a kind of double-telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Caruth, 1996: 7).

The question of the state of exception becomes most explicit in *28 Days Later* with the “military episode”. Jim, along with his co-survivors Selena (Naomie Harris), Frank (Brendan Gleeson) and his daughter Hannah (Megan Burns) responds to a recorded military broadcast asking any survivors to come to a safe haven in Manchester, where ostensibly a cure for the infection has been found. After a series of near-escapes, the quartet reaches Manchester where they are disappointed by a seemingly deserted outpost. Frank becomes infected here, by a stray drop of infected blood which falls on him after he kicks a post. He is however, shot by troops before he can do any harm. However it is at this point that the other, more potent threat in *28 Days Later* reveals itself—the threat of the “state of exception” and totalitarianism which is embodied in the figure of the army contingent led by Major Henry West (Christopher Eccleston). The filmic movement from the mise-en-scene of the desolate, devastated city, to the that of the army camp is visually coded by markers of the “state of exception”— guns, gasmasks, floodlights, barricades and barbwire, which have become a part of the collective “optical unconscious” after the traumatic experience of the Second World War. Here, I find Hannah Arendt’s work particularly illuminating in relation to the modalities in which biopolitical power operates through modalities of terror in the state of exception. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt says that “Terror is lawfulness, if the law is the law of movement of some superhuman

force, Nature and History” (Arendt, 1968: 465). In *28 Days Later* both “nature” and “history” act as the superhuman forces that have legitimized the “state of exception” and therefore, the army contingent embodies the notion of “biopolitical power” that in the state of exception, functions through modalities of terror to make decisions of the life and death of its subjects. For the army contingent, the state of exception thus becomes a “normal state”—for instance, in the dinner table sequence Major West says that all he has seen since the infection started is “people killing people” which is exactly what he has been seeing as far back as he can remember. For him, the situation of infection therefore puts them “in a state of normality right now”. This reflects Arendt’s idea that “terror is lawfulness” in the state of exception. Also before the dinner table sequence, in a conversation with Jim, Major West says that their real job beyond protection is “to rebuild”. The water boiler, the kitchen and the dinner table therefore become ways in which the contingent has taken upon itself the task of taking the “first step toward civilization”—the Foucauldian idea of biopower in which the function of the seat of authority is governance over “life” and by corollary the stalling of “death” to maximize the potential of “life”.

The notion of “rebuilding” has two further resonances. First, it means that a “cure” for the infection has to be found. Major West reveals that their “cure” to the infection lies in the figure of the captured infected soldier, Mailer (Marvin Campbell). West’s decision to let Mailer live is revealing in terms of the biopolitical sovereign’s authority over life and death. West decides to keep Mailer alive because observing him informs West about the nature of the “living dead”. Mailer thus becomes an embodiment of the cultural other—an object for the colonizer’s gaze, at once fascinating and disgusting. It is interesting to note that Mailer is portrayed by a Black British subject which makes the meaning of the “other” here, doubly loaded. The discourse of race also operates in the manner in which Mailer is restrained—his hands and feet are not cuffed, but he is chained by the neck; this manner of restraint recalls images of black slavery in which captured slaves were chained by the neck during labour.<sup>ix</sup> Ironically, it is through Mailer that the destruction of the rest of the contingent takes place later in the film. The second sense in which the notion of “rebuilding” operates has to do with absolute totalitarian authority and the regulation of “life”. Here, the sequence in which Hannah and Selena are prepared for sexual intercourse against their will is crucial. West explains to Jim that “women mean a future” in terms of survival of the species and hence the promise of “life”. Jim’s

resistance to this is met with aggression and he is captured and sentenced for execution because he opposes what the biopolitical sovereign views as the promise of ‘life’ and a ‘future’. This of course, is in stark contrast to a state of normalcy in which such a notion would be opposed by “law”. But here, in the state of exception “terror becomes lawfulness” because “survival of the fittest becomes a very literal and grim reality” (Bishop, 24). As Bishop says:

In the new zombie economy, everything is already free—except other humans, of course. For lawless renegades, the only real sport left is slavery, torture, rape, and murder, the enactment of base appetites that cannot be satisfied by simply going to the mall ...In *28 Days Later*, this vigilante scenario is all the more frightening because the primary threat comes from the military, from men who are supposed to protect citizens, not abuse them. In a misguided attempt to repopulate the world, the soldiers threaten the female protagonists with rape, and Jim (Cillian Murphy) narrowly escapes execution for defending them. (24)

Thus in the state of exception, the notion of survival is taken to its biological extremes. This situation, in which survival becomes the *only* law, is a state in which the structure of “human” society itself is reduced to “bare life”. It is ‘catastrophe’ in the Benjaminian sense because this reduction to the state of exception—the condition of “bare life”, is a representation of “time filled by the presence of the now”.



Much of the symbolism of the figure of the living dead that one encounters recurs in its sequel, *28 Weeks Later*, released in 2007. Directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo and produced by Danny Boyle, *28 Weeks Later* carries on from the basic framework provided by its predecessor, although it employs a completely different cast of characters. Unlike the first film which deals only with the initial phase of the outbreak, *28 Weeks Later* imagines a post-outbreak Britain. The film begins with a couple Don (Robert Carlyle) and Alice (Catherine McCormack) Harris who have taken shelter in a farmhouse with a few other people. Very early into the film, their hideout is attacked by the infected. Don is the only one who manages to escape, but at the cost of abandoning his wife. Thereafter, the scene changes—we see a montage of aerial shots of London and information about the progression of the disaster flashes across the screen. It is in this way that the audience comes to know that eleven weeks after the inception of the infection, a US-led NATO force has taken over Britain. Eighteen weeks later mainland Britain is declared infection-free and twenty four weeks later, reconstruction has begun. This effectively builds up the scene

for the “repetition” of the traumatic event within the film’s structure. I read *28 Weeks Later* as a companion piece to *28 Days Later* and will not focus on representations of the figure of the living dead. Rather, I would like to see *28 Weeks Later* as a progressive thematic movement from *28 Days Later*. The five year gap between the releases of the two films is also crucial to my reading. Though both films were released post 9/11, *28 Weeks Later* was released in 2007 when new sets of anxieties and disjunctures have become apparent, especially in the light of the global war on terror.

Up to this point, I haven’t explicitly related the “state of exception” to the question of “trauma”. But a consideration of trauma shows how the historical category of the “state of exception” is different conceptually from the history-less and pre-political idea of the “state of nature.” It would be easy to read the movement in the two films as a relapse from a “normal” state of law-and-order into something primeval and atavistic that lies as the “heart of darkness” underneath any human community. It’s almost as if once we peel the film of the “civilized” skin away all we are left with is the brutal “animal”. But such a reading is ahistorical and primitivist. This ahistorical notion of violence can fork out in two different directions: (a) either extreme violence is seen as a temporary aberrations from the “norm” and is thereby thrown into the trashcan of history and forgotten so that history proceeds uninterruptedly in its mundane, “rational” flow, and (b) metaphysically, it makes a presupposition about human “nature,” almost as if the barbaric “animal” in the human can be unleashed once the layer of civilization is peeled away; “culture” then emerges as the agent that holds and restrains the animality of the human. Both these versions bracket violence by positing it as rationality’s “other.” Agamben’s rerouting of the “state of exception” through Carl Schmitt and Benjamin restores the historicity of the notion of the state of exception. In my reading, the allegorical representation of “bare life” and the “state of exception” in *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later* shows a *historical* shift from the “normal”, legal sovereign state-apparatus to the state of exception—an exception which has become the norm in contemporary times (one only needs to think of Guantanamo Bay). This shift is a concretization of a *traumatic* residue, but not in the timeless, ahistorical, psychoanalytic sense in which it is sometimes deployed. Rather, I view this shift in terms of Agamben’s topological understanding of the state of exception. As a political mythology, the state of nature remains one of the most pernicious and timeless legends. For Agamben the state of nature and

the state of exception are topological inverses. Unlike *topography* in which there is a clear distinction between inside and outside, in *topology*, insides and outsides blur into each other in indistinguishable ways. For Agamben, the state of nature and the state of exception are topological inverses—this is why they look so similar. But the crucial difference between them is the historicity inhering in the idea of the state of exception. The persistence of idea of the state of nature in our political imaginaries means that when a state of exception is concretized it is confused with the human becoming animal. The idea of the “state of nature” inheres in the idea of the “state of exception”, but to say that it is a relapse to an atavistic passion is dangerous and makes way for totalitarian power to operate in absolute ways as is seen in Agamben’s accounts of concentration camps in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Instead the point is to look at the historicity of the occurrence. The movement from *28 Days Later* to *28 Weeks Later* therefore, is not a timeless movement in which traumatic recurrence occurs and proves the cyclicity of history. Rather, as Agamben shows us, I argue that the traumatic unconscious has to be seen in a historicized sense, both within the representational world of the films, as well as the “real” world of historical, off-screen narratives. This is why I emphasize on an allegorical reading of the state of exception in *28 Weeks Later* in terms of its off-screen references to the post 9/11 world.

Within the first fifteen minutes of the film, the audience is transported from the time of the original traumatic event to the time of reconstruction. The period of reconstruction has a semblance of normality in which the unregulated state of nature has been contained and biopower has been reinstated to some extent. Yet, this reinstatement of normality is a state of exception—the *topological inverse* of the state of nature. This becomes clear in the sequence in which Don’s children, Tammy (Imogen Poots) and Andy (Mackintosh Muggleton) return to London from refugee camps in Spain. As their aircraft flies over London, we see US army snipers lodged atop buildings and when they de-board from the aircraft and move towards the testing centre, they pass a corridor fortified by army personnel. The music turns ominous at this point and there are low-angle close-ups of soldiers’ faces and close-ups of hands holding guns. Here, the imagery and the soundtrack together convey a sense of impending doom, as if in foreboding of what is to follow. A cut takes us to the testing centre where new arrivals are being screened for infection. In many ways this is reminiscent of heightened, often extreme screening and security procedures that followed the 9/11 attacks. Their movement from the testing centre towards the train that will take them home is marked by shots where disinfection is taking

place—soldiers collect and dump bags labelled “biohazard”, as if to remind the audience that the biological threat of contagion within the filmic world, and by allegory the threat of biological warfare in the off-screen world, still lingers on. Further there are shots in which soldiers wearing gas masks and other protective gear dump body-bags into mass pyres, which is reminiscent of pyres in Nazi concentration camps during the period of the Holocaust.<sup>x</sup> On the train that takes them to their new home they are constantly reminded that the threat of infection is not completely gone and the only safe area is where the army has created a “Green Zone” called District One in the Isle of Dogs in London’s East-end area. There is marked military presence in terms of personnel, helicopters, army tents, trucks and even tanks. But the “Green Zone” is where human normality purportedly prevails—running water, electricity supply, a supermarket and a pub for example. The use of the term “Green Zone” is crucial here since it refers to the “International Zone of Baghdad” which was taken over by US troops in 2003 in course of the Iraq War—the “Green Zone” was designated a safe area after being wrested from the Ba’ath Party which used it as their administrative centre.<sup>xi</sup> This is a reference in which the crisis of the filmic world is likened to the crisis of the off-screen world and in *28 Weeks Later* the “Green Zone” becomes a trope whereby the on and off-screen narratives combine together in an “allegorical moment”. Like the “Green Zone” in Baghdad the “Green Zone” within the world of the film also represents an effort to capture “bare life” and restructure society around “human” structures of experience. But like the Iraqi “Green Zone” the “Green Zone” in the film is also a place where the threat of “bare life” can lead to the state of exception in the blink of an eye. The traumatic event recurs (as the film later reveals), but not in a timeless sense but in the Benjaminian sense of catastrophe, which is time bound. The traumatic recurrence therefore, is not merely the individualized, ahistorical “return of the repressed”, but is a moment of “*Jetztzeit*”—a “moment of danger” in which history is produced by seizing “hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”.

The notion of traumatic memory is also evoked in the scene where Don, after being reunited with his children has to explain what happened to their mother. Don’s inability to articulate the experience of the event and the correlated guilt of having survived by abandoning his wife recalls the idea of the “witness”. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben talks about the figure of the witness as inhabiting a “gray zone” in which the “victim and executioner are

equally ignoble” and “the oppressed become oppressor” (1999: 17, 21). In many ways Dan inhabits this “gray zone” and embodies this notion of survivor guilt—it is through this device that the traumatic recurrence is triggered in the latter part of the film. This occurs after Tammy and Andy’s discovery of their mother in their original home outside the “Green Zone”. Alice is infected but has ostensibly survived the adverse effects of the rage virus due to a genetic mutation which acts as an inhibitor. She therefore becomes the subject of great curiosity for the de-facto authority, because this means the possibility of finding a cure for the infection. But for them, she is merely a research subject—her apparent infection has relegated her to the status of “bare life” and therefore she is detained by the occupying army for research purposes. The decontamination sequence that shows a stripped, screaming Alice being hosed, scrubbed and restrained against her will is an example of the reduction to “bare life” in the state of exception. In a sense she is now no different than Auschwitz’s *Muselmanner* and this sequence is reminiscent of archival images of naked, Holocaust-era concentration camp detainees reduced to the condition of “bare life”, so effectively used by Alain Resnais in *Night and Fog*. But such imagery also has a contemporary resonance in relation to the post 9/11 accounts of Guantanamo Bay detainees and especially, the infamous and much publicized photographs of the humiliation and torture of inmates at Abu Ghraib in 2004-2005. Such situations display the totalitarian operation of biopower in the state of exception and the absolute authority it wields over the corporeal. It is Dan’s “survivor guilt” that makes him bypass security restrictions and visit Alice in her chamber. Dan apologizes to Alice and professes his love for her—but he is infected when the two share a kiss. The infection causes Dan to go on a rampage. He brutally kills his wife and also kills and infects many others.

The fragility of the “normal” structure of social life in the Green Zone is thus revealed when the infection spreads rapidly and explicitly throws the seemingly “normal” Green Zone back to a “state of exception”. The recurrence of the infection leads to the declaration of a “Code Red” which basically is a “military term for highest authority action given primarily in extermination by all means necessary”.<sup>xii</sup> All civilian privileges in the Green Zone thereby become suspended and the army becomes the sole authority. The scene where civilians are summarily herded up in a queue and forced into containment chambers is also reminiscent of the memory of the concentration camps during the Second World War. In effect, the lines between the state of nature and the state of exception are blurred because the civilian subject becomes

completely subordinated to sovereign biopower. This is further highlighted when, on further contamination, snipers receive the order to shoot *anyone* at ground level. Here, as Arendt says “terror becomes lawfulness” and the sovereign wields its authority to make decisions over what has the right to live and what has to die.

The recurrence of the infection and the immediate destabilization of “normality” that it brings with it, thus, is a traumatic recurrence in two senses. First, it is a “peculiar” and “uncanny way in which” the catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them”. (Caruth: 1) Second, in relation to the movement from *28 Days Later* to *28 Weeks Later*, it marks a “double-telling” (3) which operates within the structure of the traumatic imagination—a sort of a Freudian “return of the repressed” in the off-screen universe, but a historicized, allegorical one. Within the course *28 Weeks Later*, Andy is also infected by Dan (who is shot by Tammy), but like his mother, reveals a resistance to the virus. Both siblings are carried away by helicopter to apparent safety, across the Channel to France. The film does not end on an optimistic note however, and comes full circle when one considers the conversation from *28 Days Later* when Jim, after being rescued from the infection during his first encounter is told by Selena that the day before all radio and television broadcasts stopped, there were reports of infection in New York and Paris. *28 Weeks Later* ends with shots of the infected running in the streets against the backdrop of the Eiffel Tower. Thus, citing Sontag I would like to argue that in *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later*, the theme is “disaster”, the shocking representation of which is “a matter of quantity and ingenuity ... a question of scale”.

#### IV

The third film that I analyze, *Children of Men* (2006) directed by Alfonso Cuarón takes the post-human imagination of disaster in a slightly different direction. Unlike the two earlier films, *Children of Men* does not deal with the figure of the “living dead”. But “life” and “death” are important operative tropes here as well and are connected by the notion of “birth”. The plot of the film is set in the year 2027 in a world that has not seen any new births for almost two decades. This is set around a subplot in which Britain is one of the last organized states still in existence—issues of terrorism, immigration and xenophobia are weaved into the narrative through the larger post-apocalyptic vision propelled by the trope of “infertility”. The plot

revolves around the character of Theo Faron (played by Clive Owen), who by a series of coincidences ventures out on a quest to arrange for the safe passage of a pregnant African immigrant, Kee (Claire-Hope Ashitey). The figure of Kee is crucial as she embodies the possibility of birth and hence life. In *Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt says that totalitarian government functions by basing itself on its subject's isolation and loneliness—"the experience of not belonging to the world at all" (1968: 475). The imagined world of 2027 in *Children of Men* is one where this "experience of not belonging" has been concretized by the fact of infertility and by corollary, the impending doom of the species. This world therefore is in a permanent state of exception where the human is gradually approaching the condition of "bare life". Kee's pregnancy then becomes central to any resistance to this state of exception.

Birth and the emergence of new life, thus, operate as a key out of the labyrinthine prison created and sustained by the governing functions of biopower. In *The Human Condition* Arendt says that the new "always appears in the guise of a miracle" and that "with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world" (Arendt, 1998: 178). The trope of birth therefore acts as a contingency that can jolt "bare life" out of the state of exception that has become normalized. It is important to note the context in which Arendt was writing; she based her analysis of totalitarian authority and its "iron band" of authority over the human subject, on modern forms of totalitarian, 'biopolitical' states such as Nazi Germany. In this context, the trope of birth in *Children of Men*, when read through this historicized lens becomes loaded with meaning. Like in Arendt's analysis, the "birth" of Kee's child then brings about the possibility of a contingent situation because it is "something uniquely new" which has come to pass. This effectively marks the fact that "every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning" and "this beginning is guaranteed by each new birth" (1968: 478, 479). The trope of birth therefore, reinstates human agency to "bare life" and symbolizes a way out of the traumatic everyday and banal repetition of the state of exception. In this sense, *Children of Men* differs radically from both *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later*, where the notion of survival also accrues from the idea of "bare life" but means survival only in the biological sense of the term. But in *Children of Men* survival escapes the trap of "bare life" and agency is given to the human subject even in the face of a traumatic event.

The discourse of the "other" is also central to the way in which *Children of Men* operates. Slavoj Žižek, in an interview says that the true focus of *Children of Men* lies in the *background*

and can only be recognized when viewed *obliquely*.<sup>xiii</sup> The discourse of the “other” is one of the film’s central foci and lies in the background, also raising corollary issues of contemporary race politics, xenophobia and immigration issues while at the same time mobilizing the audience’s “optical unconscious” to make references to an archive of past as well as contemporary off-screen narratives of xenophobia, detention camps and racial conflict. Here, the *mise-en-scene* of the film becomes crucial as it is within this that visual clues about such issues are often encoded. For instance, towards the beginning of the film, when Theo de-boards the train on the way back from office to meeting his friend Jasper (Michael Caine), we see shots of immigrants detained in cages guarded by armed soldiers as the camera tracks Theo. Again, when Theo is travelling in the car with Jasper, we see a shot of an armoured bus passing by, containing illegal immigrants who as Jasper comments are hunted down “like cockroaches” by the British Government. These images of detention, transportation and camps are reminiscent of Nazi era transportation and internment in concentration camps. The soundtrack also plays an allegorical role here; in the scene where Theo’s other companion, Miriam (Pam Ferris) is forcibly taken off the bus and separated from Theo and Kee at the Bexhill refugee camp, the song playing in the background is by the British rock band “The Libertines” and is titled “Arbeit Macht Frei”.<sup>xiv</sup> This is an oblique reference to Auschwitz where this German phrase, literally meaning “work sets a man free”, marked the entrance to the dreaded Nazi concentration camp. But in a more contemporary sense, these images in *Children of Men* are also allegorical of modern day detention camps. In an interview with *Rotten Tomatoes* Cuarón says “We were thinking Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and The Maze. And those were our visual references”.<sup>xv</sup> This contemporary frame of reference reveals itself time and again in the film. For instance in the scene where “Theo and Kee are smuggled into Bexhill, the camera shows cages with orange-clad, shaved prisoners, and stripped and kneeling prisoners line the streets. These images are explicit references to and reenactments of Guantánamo pictures.” (Jung, 2010: 105) Thus the traumatic referent of such representations in *Children of Men* lies not only in the past but also in the contemporary era. The discourse of race and the other in *Children of Men* therefore transcends simplistic binary polarities of black versus white, or East versus West, but mutates into far more complex forms when seen through the lens of the larger, contemporary discourse of biopower. In relation to this, it is crucial that the promise of a new beginning “guaranteed by each new birth” manifests itself through the figure of

Kee who is not only of Afro-American descent, but is also an immigrant. Here, it is the “other” (who is ostensibly designated the category of “bare life” in the state of exception) that “appears in the guise of a miracle”, which is a radical intervention that Cuarón makes in *Children of Men*.

The contemporary frame of reference also functions in other subtle ways. This has to do with the way in which the camera and imagery is deployed to allegorically point at the referents in the off-screen world. For instance, in Theo’s bus journey scene in the beginning of the film, there are shots of rioting and violence from all over the world (Tokyo, Brussels, Hong Kong, New York to name a few locations) assembled into a montage in the propaganda video that is played on the TV screen in the bus (it is through this that we come to know that Britain is the last organized state still functioning). Here, “the cities’ names – New York among them - become an acronym for the otherwise unspeakable horror that happened there. In the propaganda piece, the reference to 9/11 is contextualized with other attacks. (sic)” (Jung, 105) The deployment of the image here works in much the same way as the Guantanamo Bay reference in the Bexhill sequence. Similarly, the chaotic space of the refugee ghetto in Bexhill is also loaded with such signs. For instance, the sequence in which “we see marching protesters shouting in Arabic, thrusting machine guns in the air, carrying banners and headbands with Arabic signs, a crowd carrying the body of a dead man, a woman wailing over a deadly wounded in her arms” (105) recalls TV and journalistic images of the Middle Eastern War Zone or the War in Iraq (105). As Berenike Jung says:

The film’s use of references and contemporary war imagery tends to disrupt the creation of the cinematic illusion. This strategy has already introduced by its narrative discourse, such as the subjective camerawork. Explicit references in the form of iconic images can be interpreted as a reflection on the way in which cinema was challenged by 9/11, as they mimic the “intrusion of the real.” (106-107)

In this context, the “uprising” sequence set in the ghetto towards the end of the film becomes crucial as it refers to contemporary televised images of terror and violence not only in terms of content, but also in terms of technique. Here, there is a spectacularly long take which begins with Theo and Kee’s exit from a tunnel, through their capture by the “Fishes” (the revolutionary group that claims to fight for the rights of all immigrants and hence wants the baby), to Theo’s journey to the building where Kee has been taken and their final exit out of it. Here, the camera operates in a cinema-verité mode which is closely associated with the realism of live TV footage of actual news coverage of war. The shaky, hand-held camera with the lens at one point being

splattered with drops of blood, and the employment of the long take devoid of any cuts endow the sequence with a sense of realism that evokes the optical unconscious and thus speaks to us about the contemporary in an allegorical manner. Ironically here, the scene where the violence stops briefly when everyone realizes that Kee is carrying the first human baby seen in eighteen years is a moment of “shocking representation”. It is shocking, not in the same manner as in *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later*, but as a reversion of the whole notion of “shocking representation”. Here the shock accrues from the miraculous event of birth, which is in stark contrast to the traumatic, predominating condition of “bare life”. When a biopolitical state of exception has become normalized, the precious event of birth irrupts as a shock—a literal blast from the past that has the potential of radically changing the continuum of history.

## V

The foregoing analyses of the three films I have chosen reveal the various ways in which science fiction and horror allegorically speak about catastrophe and trauma. But my choice of films has not been random. Rather, I have consciously chosen films which imagine a post-apocalyptic nightmare in a particular nation state—Britain. The idea is to contextualize the notion of catastrophe and see how the vicissitudes of traumatic experience operate within particular political and historical contexts, albeit in divergent ways. Such science-fiction and horror films do not necessarily speak directly about traumatic experience in the off-screen world. Yet the catastrophic imaginary that inheres in the narratives of these films is both shaped by and references actual traumatic experiences. In *28 Days Later*, *28 Weeks Later* and *Children of Men* therefore, there are resonances of traces of the past as well as the present. Historical discourse is obliquely, not objectively produced in these films through a dialectical relationship between the allegorical references of the past and the contemporary—the colonial discourse of race and the contemporary discourse of xenophobia post 9/11 for example. In a true Benjaminian sense, these catastrophic, post-apocalyptic imaginaries produce a Foucauldian “history of the present” by catching “hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”.<sup>xvi</sup> In doing so, it also manages to write haunting chronicles of our post-human futures.

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## **Notes**

<sup>i</sup> See Michel Foucault, “*The Order Of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*” p386

<sup>ii</sup> See Walter Benjamin “The Little History of Photography” in *Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927-1934*

<sup>iii</sup> An example of the “optical unconscious” would be a familiar scenario in many movies and detective novels where a trace left behind on a photograph, often appearing without the conscious intent of the cameraman, leads to the resolution of a mystery.

<sup>iv</sup> See the last chapter of *The History of Sexuality Vol I* (1976)

<sup>v</sup> The first full-scale zombie movie—*White Zombie* (1932)—is based on this colonial trope of possession by voodoo seances

<sup>vi</sup> It is interesting to note that Frantz Fanon in his chapter “*Colonial wars and Mental Disorders*” in *The Wretched of the Earth* likens the colony to a concentration camp where the colonized are reduced to the status of the living dead. See Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* pp230-33

<sup>vii</sup> The term *Muselmann* as Agamben points out, derives from “the Arabic word Muslim: the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God [...] But while the muslim’s resignation consists in the conviction that the will of Allah is at work every moment and even the smallest events, the *Muselmann* of Auschwitz is instead defined by a loss of all will and consciousness”. Other, more corporeal explanations accrue from “the typical movements of *Muselmanner*, the swaying motions of the upper body” during prayer, and the corruption of the word *Muschelmann*, “shell-man”, “a man folded and closed upon himself”. (Agamben, 1999: 45)

<sup>viii</sup> One could also consider Britain’s own complicity in the creation of concentration camps during the Second Boer War, wherein Boer inmates were reduced to the condition of “bare life” in much the same way as Auschwitz’s *Muselmanner*. For archival images of British Concentration Camp inmates see

<http://www.boer.co.za/boerwar/hellkamp.htm>

<sup>ix</sup> For an image of collared Afro-American slaves see

<http://jcb.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/detail/JCB~1~1~5082~7960003:Slaves-chained-together-by-the-neck>

<sup>x</sup> A similar corresponding image can be seen in Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993)

<sup>xi</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green\\_Zone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Zone)

<sup>xii</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=military+code>

<sup>xiii</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbgrwNP\\_gYE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbgrwNP_gYE)

<sup>xiv</sup> See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0206634/trivia?tr0742695>

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<sup>xv</sup> See

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/children\\_of\\_men/news/1563932/children\\_of\\_men\\_director\\_alfonso\\_cuaron](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/children_of_men/news/1563932/children_of_men_director_alfonso_cuaron)

<sup>xvi</sup> See Michel Foucault “*Discipline and Punish*” p31

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