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Fear in the post-apocalyptic movies of the 90's-2000's

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In the last decades, the movie industry has produced hundreds of blockbusters in the post-apocalyptic genre, i.e. science-fiction movies picturing the end of civilization and the human race after great disasters such as a natural catastrophes, nuclear wars or plagues. These films, often considered as "B genre" movies, might have a certain cathartic function beyond their mere entertainment value. In some ways, they concentrate the popular anxieties of their time and push the possible scenarios of the reality to their limits, oscillating between plausibility and over-exaggerated violence. This is especially the case with post-apocalyptic movies which exploit the fear of pandemics and viral plagues such as *Outbreak* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1995), *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995), *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), the third sequel of the movie based on the eponymous video game, *Resident Evil: Extinction* (Russell Mulcahy, 2007) and *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007), inspired by Richard Matheson's novel (1954).

Primal fears

These movies are first meant to create feelings of horror and fear in the spectator, the primal fear being that of death. Thus, these movies do not only display images of dead people but they play with the suffering and the deformation caused by illness. The first characteristic of the viruses is the rapidity of their spread, airborne contamination being the fastest type, as in *I am Legend*, where people get infected merely by breathing contaminated air. In the other movies, the virus mostly spreads by contact with infected fluids or biting, which also allows for more spectacular fights splattered with blood. Indeed blood plays one of the important roles in these movies, as it is the most visible representation of the deterioration of the body. In all movies, except *Twelve Monkeys* where the virus and its effects are almost not shown, once one gets infected, one does not only die, but also has to endure the intense pain of being deadly sick, as in *Outbreak* where the agony is described by an officer of the U.S. army: "When the patient first gets the virus, he complains of flu-like symptoms and in two or three days, pink lesions begin to appear all over his body along with small pustules that soon erupt with blood and pus (...). These particular lesions become blown. They feel like mush. There is vomiting and diarrhea and bleeding in the nose, ears, gums; the eyes hemorrhage, the internal organs shut down, they liquify..." *Outbreak* gives a very realistic representation of the symptoms, as the virus called "Motoba" is directly inspired from the Ebola virus and its own symptoms. Thus, the mask of death quickly replaces the one of the living and becomes the antithesis of the sanitary mask worn by the doctors and scientists.

Indeed, what is also at stake in the conflict between the sane people and the sick people is their humanity, and what could be more fearful than death if it is not becoming a monster, especially a

zombie or a living-dead. Thus, except for *Outbreak* and *Twelve Monkeys*, the pandemics turn the infected people into zombies (or vampires, in the case of *I am Legend*). The main characteristic of the zombies are their beastliness and their inherent stupidity, they are the extreme metaphor of monstrosity as their body is mutilated, their moves are not human anymore, they are awkward, mechanical and they attack indifferently, usually starting with family and friends. In *28 Days Later*, the virus named "Rage", inspired by rabid viruses, turns infected people into mindless and vicious creatures; when Selena, one of the main characters, is asked how she knew that her friend who she just executed with a machete was infected, she replies: "I didn't know he was infected, but *he knew* and I could see it in his face. If someone got infected, you've got between ten and twenty seconds to kill them. It might be your brother or your sister or your oldest friend, it makes no difference." Each person is a potential monster as each one can break the boundary of humanity and pass to the "other side" once infected. The virus seems to awaken the dormant bestiality within us as it forces the survivors to fight and kill for their existence.

The animality of humanity

The themes of war and battles are omnipresent in the movies which all develop the topics of hunting, of the relationship between man and animal, predator and prey. Animals indeed play an important role in all the movies. The recurring animal is the monkey, who is the carrier of the virus in *Outbreak* and more specifically the chimpanzee in *28 Days Later*. This movie starts with scenes of experimentations and torture of chimpanzees which are, among other cruelties, forced to watch clips of extreme violence broadcasted on TV. The line between humanity and animality is then crossed when we no longer know which one is the crueller between both. Ironically, in the movie mentioned above, it is the attempt by animal activists to save the monkeys that starts the virus outbreak when one of the chimpanzees infected with the "Rage" virus bites one of the activists. *Twelve Monkeys* also exploits the theme of animals ill-treatment, drawing a parallel between the way monkeys serve as guinea-pigs and the way a "healthy society" treats its mentally-ill subjects, segregating them into asylums or making experiments on the prisoners. And, at the asylum, one of the interneers affirms it the main hero: "Torturing experiments. We are all monkeys (...) Maybe the human race deserves to be wiped out". Furthermore, in the post-apocalyptic future drawn by this movie, men are forced to live underground while animals occupy the surface: the engaged ones are no longer the animals, they're the humans.

So, one of the other fears also exploited in these movies is the transformation of man into a prey: man is no longer the dominant species as we are close to eradication (many of these movies explicitly indicate the level of infection e.g. *Twelve Monkeys* mentions 5bn people, leaving only 10% survivors,) and sane people are hunted down by zombies who feed on them. Survivors have to live hidden, always on the watch for a danger which surrounds and outnumbers them; the environment has become hostile to them, cities are deserted, without electricity and drinkable water (*I Am Legend*, *28 Days Later*), its also explained by the heroine in the beginning of *Resident Evil 3*: "The virus didn't just wipe out human life; lakes and rivers dried out, forests became deserts and whole continents were reduced to nothing more than bare wastelands. Slowly but surely, the Earth began to wither and die." Then, besides escaping from zombies, the survivors have to sustain their more elementary needs: food and water. *I Am Legend* describes in length the daily routine of Robert Neville, the main hero, who endures a solitary life during three years, scouring the city of New York and visiting abandoned flats in search for supplies. During one of his excursions, he spots a stag which he aims at with his rifle, just before a lion

pounces on the prey. In fact this scene can be seen as the counterpart of the one when Neville is caught in a trap set by the vampires and attacked by infected dogs, he barely escapes but his own dog and only companion gets bitten and he has to execute her, grieving inwardly.

The conspiracy and the cure

The survivors are then isolated and left to ones' own devices, they cannot even trust other sane people as some of them reveal themselves to be worse than the zombies they fight: in *Resident Evil 3*, a bunch of stereotypical rednecks set a trap to capture the heroine, they are obviously only motivated by cruelty and sadism and the heroine has no other choice than to kill them indifferently, in the same way exterminates the zombies. As the human race comes close to extinction, the humanity of those remaining appears to vanish too. It is also noticeable that the survivors are mostly youngsters, kids or the military. They are then divided into two groups which could be roughly summarized as the "goodies" and the "baddies". The masses themselves identify two different types of people: the zombie crowd and the army. Apart from *Twelve Monkeys*, the army and associated medical researchers play an important role in the movies chosen here: In their own way, all these stories celebrate the triumph of individualism over the masses and the success of guerilla over big-scale war. In *Outbreak* for example, the U.S. army knows beforehand the existence of the virus and as they plan to use it as a biological weapon, they are ready to all means in order to protect its secrecy. They even destroy a mercenary camp in Africa and order the bombing of the town where the virus outbreak occurred. More generally, the outbreaks of viruses in the different movies are all parts of diverse conspiracies or products of experiments made by mad scientists (*Resident Evil*). When the origin of the virus is unknown, the army still seems to aggravate the situation by its incapacity to contain the infection and to control the panic of the crowd, and the crowd is the ideal place for the virus to spread.

Contrary to the masses of dead and undead, the survivors are scattered and have to move around restlessly, either to escape to their assailants or to reach a territory which hasn't been infected by the virus. Thus, as the heroine of *Resident Evil 3* states at the beginning of the movie: "The few survivors there were, wanted to keep on the move. We avoided major cities, if we stopped any place too long, they would be drawn to us. Only a few at first, but then more and more, a never-ending army of undead. Staying on the road seemed the only way to stay alive." The last contacts with humans are messages left on a notebook (*Resident Evil*) or transmitted by radio (*28 Days Later*, *I Am Legend*), a digital voice which leads the survivors either to their destruction or their salvation. The survivors mostly head towards the North with the hope to find other sane people in some regions where the cold weather might slow down or stop the progression of the virus. In *Twelve Monkeys*, the main character, James Cole, even travels back in time to collect information on the virus and eventually obtains an original sample of the virus so a cure can be made. Then in some of these movies, emerges a certain image of the hero/ine who is also somehow 'superhuman' like Alice (*Resident Evil*) who was genetically modified by the same corporation that created the deadly virus and who carries the cure in her blood; or – to a lesser extent – Neville (*I Am Legend*) who possesses a natural immunity to the virus and finally succeeds in his researches to find a cure, for which he sacrifices himself at the end of the movie.

At the end, the hero is still above all a human, vulnerable even when immune; he/she is still primarily driven by the intense fear of dying and suffering. To overcome this fear, the supreme step is to tame

the monster that lies dormant within a 'normal' person, might it be by becoming oneself *this* monster as Jim from *28 Days Later* experiences, when he kills savagely the remaining soldiers. Just as the spreading of a virus in *Outbreak* is a chain of events where the virus travels from a monkey, to a man who brings back the virus on a plane and contaminates a whole theater, the final raison d'être of the hero reveals itself in his very ability to break that same chain of doom.

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