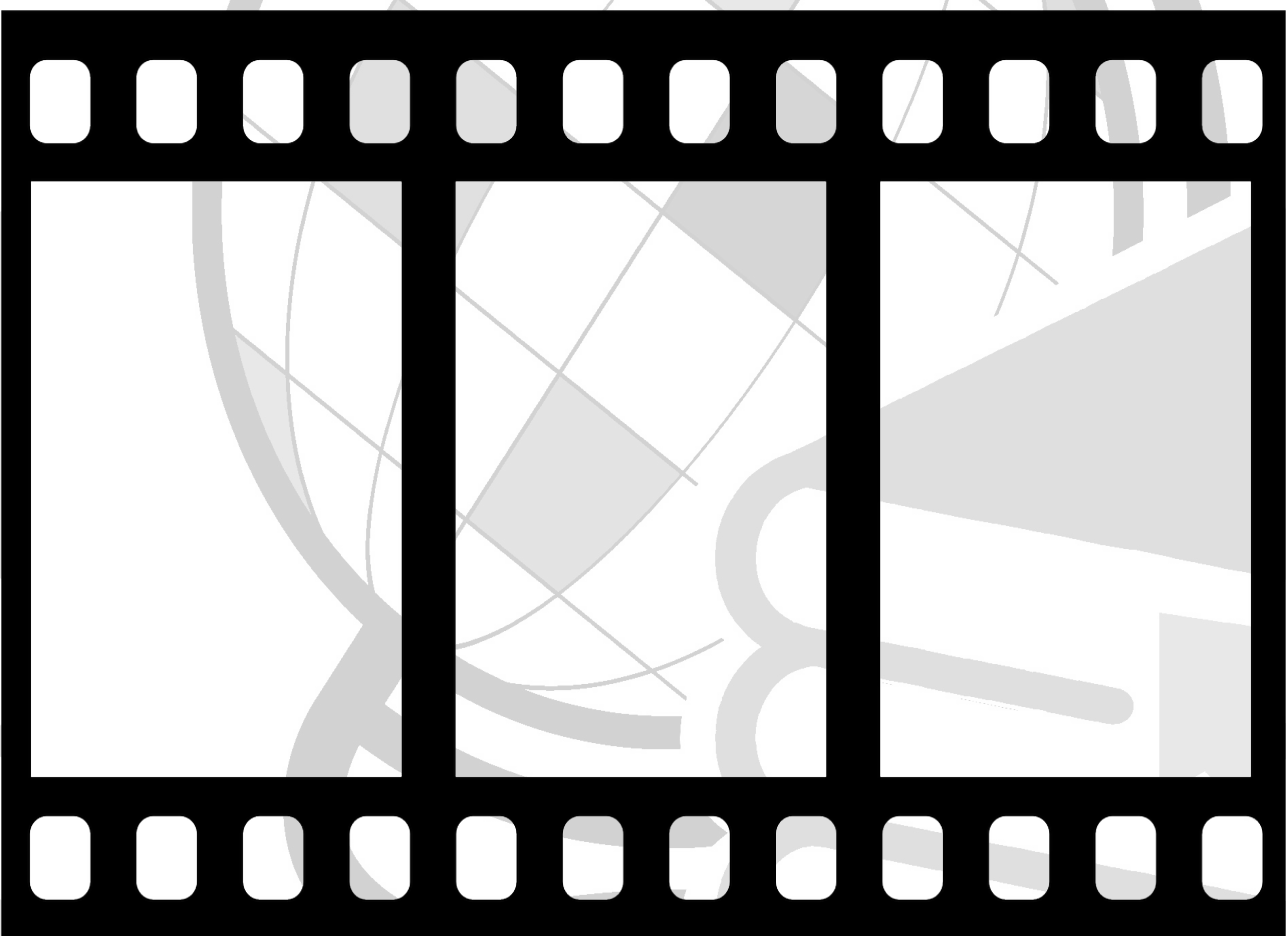


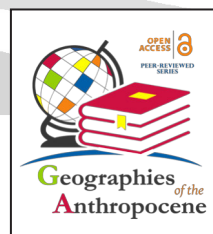
# CINEMA, DISASTERS AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

*Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez (Editors)*



Foreword by David McEntire

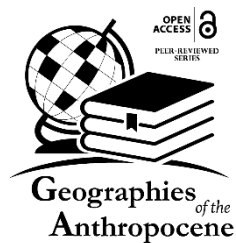
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# Cinema, Disasters and the Anthropocene

Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez

*Editors*



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*Cinema, Disasters and the Anthropocene*  
Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez (Eds.)

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## 5. Towards a Humble Vision in the Anthropocene: Critique of Anthropocentrism in *I Am Legend*

Seçil Erkoç Iqbal<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer's introduction of the term 'Anthropocene' as a new geological epoch in 2000 marks the evolution of humankind into a geological force that threatens the well-being of the planet. Translated as the 'recent age of humankind,' Anthropocene seems to strengthen the anthropocentric legacy of the human since it underlines the destructive capacities of the *anthropos* who has gradually impaired the ecological balance and triggered environmental disasters. Nevertheless, it would be a short-sighted vision to consider the human as the sole denominator of all these calamities because, living in a 'posthuman space of becoming,' all human and nonhuman entities are bound by an intra-active set of relations. Thus, without ignoring the negative contribution of humankind in harming the ecological system, it is crucial to develop a more encompassing perspective that takes a critical note of the agential capacities of all human and nonhuman matter. Relatedly, cultural modes of representation, such as cinema and literature, are effective mediums to explore the imaginary projections of human-nonhuman continuum and to lay bare the need to dissolve the anthropocentric mindset. Within this perspective, the purpose of this study is to analyze the American movie, *I Am Legend* (2007), which is considered as a post-apocalyptic action thriller. Based on Richard Matheson's novel (1954) of the same title, *I Am Legend* is about the struggles of a virologist, Robert Neville, who is left defenseless amid a large group of people infected by a virus that has the agential power to turn them into vampiric mutants. Hence, Neville devotes his life to find an effective treatment to cure the disease, and he turns into a 'legend' by risking his own life to save humanity. Juxtaposing the representation of the *anthropos* in two different modes of cultural production i.e., the textual and the cinematic, that are separated by a fifty-three-year gap, it is intended to trace the way in which the Anthropocene functions as an alarm clock that verifies the need to re-evaluate the so-called 'unshakeable' status of humankind – especially

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<sup>1</sup> Assist. Prof. Dr., Department of Western Languages and Literatures, İnönü University (Malatya/Türkiye), secil.erkoc@inonu.edu.tr, secilerkoc@hotmail.com.

considering how the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in drastic socio-economic and political changes all around the globe.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, Post-plague, Cinematographic narration, Speculative fiction, Human-Nonhuman entanglement.

## 1. Introduction

As opposed to the interpretation of the matter as an inert entity which is affected by an exterior force, there is a growing intellectual tendency to re-evaluate the agential capacities of the matter from a comprehensive standpoint in the twenty-first century. With the introduction of novel philosophical approaches such as new materialism(s)<sup>2</sup> and agential realism<sup>3</sup>, anthropocentric projections of the matter as a ‘passive object’ are exchanged with an egalitarian standpoint that takes a note of the matter’s inherent dynamism. It may be interpreted as a direct blow to the anthropocentric evaluation of the Earth as a *tabula rasa* that waits to be reconfigured, explored, and dominated, since it is now argued that “matter is agentive and intra-active” (Barad, 2007, p. 170). Within this spectrum, humankind can no longer project itself as the ultimate denominator and the controller of the more-than-human-world; instead, it is a member of this evolving system which continues renewing and upgrading itself incessantly. Therefore, it is crucial to represent the intra-action between humans and nonhumans from an eco-centric perspective and to dwell on its intellectual and material repercussions.

The Anthropocene announces the increasing level of human-nonhuman intra-action from a material-semiotic standpoint; thus, as a geological epoch, it lends itself as a suitable setting to elaborate on the dialogue between the two. The material and the semiotic dimensions of the Anthropocene will be explained in further detail below; nevertheless, to understand the main focus of this study, it is beneficial to provide a general outlook. The material dimension relates to the concrete and corporeal inputs that harbinger the physical intervention of the humankind in the regular functioning of the Earth and its outcomes – such as climate change and global warming. The semiotic dimension, on the other hand, is more about the symbolic and notional aspect

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<sup>2</sup> See Tillman, R., 2015, “Toward a New Materialism: Matter as Dynamic,” *Minding Nature*, 8, 1, 30-35.

<sup>3</sup> See Barad, K., 2007, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham.

of the Anthropocene, and it relates to the intellectual codes that blunt the myopic standpoint of the humankind so that it will no longer continue embracing an ego-centric vision. In other words, the semiotic aspect of the ‘recent age of man’ urges humans to re-evaluate their position and to acknowledge the agential faculties of the nonhuman matter because its impact penetrates deeper into the corporeal and social territories. To illustrate, COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted as a ‘material-semiotic’ agent which not only affects the human corpus but also the social, political, and economic domains. Hence, triggering an abrupt shift on micro and macro levels – ranging from the social to the political dynamics all around the globe – the pandemic reminds humanity of its vulnerable status as a biological entity. Having suffered from the material and the semiotic proponents of the *coronavirus* in various dimensions by firsthand, it is an enlightening experience to revisit the imaginary works exemplifying the agential faculties of the nonhuman matter i.e., the viruses or germs which violate the well-functioning of a healthy organism and announce their own autonomy. Hence, it is to be accentuated that rather than glorifying the so-called ‘legendary’ capacities of humankind, it is necessary to develop a much comprehensive vision that re-positions humankind back to the humble seat that it has been sharing with all human and nonhuman inhabitants of the universe.

In this manner, Richard Matheson’s (1926-2013) novel, *I Am Legend* (1954), provides a fruitful basis to trace and reflect on the anxieties of the *anthropos* whose future is threatened by a cataclysmic vampire plague. Adapted for the silver screen three times, *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (2007), the novel is about the last surviving human on Earth, Robert Neville, who desperately tries to find a way to cure the disease. Set in Los Angeles, Matheson’s novel starts in January 1976 and depicts Neville’s earlier attempts to understand the cause of the plague. Having turned his house into a fortress, as it is open to the attacks of the vampiric mutants who roam all around the city at night, Neville goes out in daylight to hunt and destroy the infected bodies before they are able to find and kill him. It is a physically and psychologically consuming process for Neville since he has already lost his wife Virginia and his daughter Kathy to the germ. Despite coming to the verge of giving up a few times, Neville manages to improve both his hunting skills and his understanding of the vampires through his research and study at Los Angeles public library. After two years of incessant struggle for survival, he meets Ruth – a seemingly healthy human – for the first time and welcomes her to his house. However, it turns out that Ruth is a spy belonging to a new community of vampires whose members have developed a pill to control the adverse impacts of the

*vampiris bacillus*; and in their vision of the new world order, Neville is a threat to be exterminated. With the imminent execution of Neville by the dictum of the non-zombified vampires who plan to set up a new *oikos* for themselves, Matheson's novel blurs the distinctions between human and nonhuman, predator and prey, hero and victim, legend and history; therefore, the text lights up the ground for a non-dogmatic perspective which acknowledges the fluidity and interchangeability of the widely accepted norms and regulations of the pre-pandemic world. Thus, in the final adaptation of Matheson's novel of the same title, the movie *I Am Legend*<sup>4</sup> (2007) continues demonstrating the fears and concerns of the twenty-first century, and it raises questions about the precarious status of humankind in the face of environmental and socio-economic disasters that are likely to become the indispensable markers of the current geological epoch pertaining to all human and nonhuman inhabitants of the Earth. Following an interdisciplinary approach, the analysis of *Legend* is to encompass the theoretical repercussions of posthumanism as well as new materialism(s), so that the increasing prominence of the cinematographic narrative in the time of the Anthropocene will be assessed from a broader perspective.

In her insightful critique of the term 'Anthropocene,' Kathleen Dean Moore (2013) warns that words should be used cautiously because they are effective items, for "[w]ith a single misguided phrase, they can move a concept from one world into another, altering forever the landscape of our thinking" (par. 4). Alerting us to the hubristic nuances of the term, the Anthropocene, – for it may also be interpreted as projecting the human as an ultimate agent who is powerful enough to intervene in the geological undercurrents of the Earth – Moore develops an analytical stance which reads against the misguided projections that tend to validate an anthropocentric perspective. Nevertheless, it should be noted that such a stance does not necessarily "conjure a naïve view of life as an Edenic kingdom" (Crist, 2013, p. 143) where human and nonhuman entities live in total harmony. Within this context, though *Legend* concludes with Robert Neville's self-sacrifice to save all humanity, it would be an unrealistic vision to assume that people will live happily ever after in a re-configured and sterile setting that has been established by the survivors of the plague. The visual and the textual narratives of the Anthropocene, therefore, should be examined with an eco-centric focus that problematizes the human-nonhuman binary. In other words, rather than representing humankind as the sole denominator of the anthropogenic causes in a traditional setting, the agential power of the

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<sup>4</sup> Hereafter will be referred to as *Legend*.

nonhuman matter should also be taken into consideration. Thereby, it can be argued that the dialogue between cinema and the Anthropocene is to entail an alternative *prognosis* which can no longer designate the more-than-human world as a passive entity that remains unresponsive to the human intervention but acknowledges the co-constitutive entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies.

## **2. The Material and the Semiotic Dimension of the Anthropocene in a Posthuman Space<sup>5</sup>**

First introduced by the American limnologist Eugene F. Stoermer in the 1980s, the Anthropocene earns its academic status with Stoermer and the Dutch atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen's publication of their co-authored article, "The Anthropocene" in 2000 (Otter, 2018, p. 568). Descending from the Greek, the Anthropocene means 'the recent age of man,' and it marks the current geological epoch replacing the Holocene, which is thought to have started about 12.000 years ago when humankind gradually gives up its hunter-gatherer practices and embraces a settled life that is based on agriculture and stock farming (Whitehead, 2014, p. 2). As for the starting date of the Anthropocene, however, there are various interpretations: "some date its emergence to the rise of sedentary agricultural communities roughly 12.000 years ago, others to 1610 and the colonization of the Americas, others still to the onset of Europe's industrial revolution circa 1800 or the Trinity nuclear test of 1945" (Nixon, 2018, p. 2). Acknowledging the somewhat arbitrary nature of the attempt to ascertain a distinct date for the start of the Anthropocene, Crutzen (2000) and Stoermer (2000) designate the second half of the eighteenth-century as their departure point, and they explain that during this period "data retrieved from glacial ice cores show the beginning of a growth in the atmospheric concentrations of several 'greenhouse gases,' in particular CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub>. Such a starting date also coincides with James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1784" (pp. 17-18).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that fossil fuels were used by humankind in the pre-Anthropocene era, too. To exemplify, during the reign of the Song Dynasty in China (960-1279), iron industry was a significant component of the Asian trade, so the coal was widely processed (Steffen *et al.*, 2007, p.

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<sup>5</sup> This section of the study has been partially derived from the introduction chapter of the author's dissertation "'Out of the Maze of Dualisms': Posthuman Space in Mario Petrucci and Alice Oswald's Poetry" (2020) which is available on <http://www.openaccess.hacettepe.edu.tr:8080/xmlui/handle/11655/22869>

615). Similarly, starting from the thirteenth century onwards, coal mines were providing energy for home heating in England (Steffen *et al.*, 2007, p. 615). In this respect, outlining the historical markers of human-induced air pollution, Mark Whitehead (2014) maintains that atmospheric contamination may be traced back to the fourteenth-century England when “King Edward I passed a Royal Proclamation banning the burning of sea coal in furnaces in 1306” (p. 46). However, with the rise of the human population and the decrease in the number of the natural sources, the consumption of the coal continues increasing throughout the history. In the seventeenth century, for instance, the English diarist John Evelyn (1620-1706) “published his famous observations on London’s air pollution problems, *Fumifugium, or the Inconvenience of the Aer and Smoke of London Dissipated*,” and he tried to raise environmental awareness (Whitehead, 2014, p. 48). Still, the demands of the modern industrial civilization have been louder and more powerful than such environmental concerns; therefore, humankind has paved the way for the eventual rise in the concentration of greenhouse gases globally. Accordingly, it can be asserted that Crutzen and Stoermer’s designation of the eighteenth century as the harbinger of the Anthropocene does not ignore the pre-industrial dynamics. Rather, they argue that starting from the eighteenth century onwards, the detrimental traces of the human imprint cannot be restricted to a local territory; instead, these imprints encompass the whole Earth. Indeed, the chronological categorization method concerning the rising levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere enables us to realize the impending ecological threat more vividly.

In the first stage of the Anthropocene, covering the years between 1800/50 and 1945, the levels of CO<sub>2</sub> “rose about 25 ppm” and it was high enough “to surpass the upper limit of natural variation through the Holocene” (Steffen *et al.*, 2007, p. 616). In its next stage, which is also known as the ‘Great Acceleration,’ encompassing the years between 1945 and 2015, humankind has witnessed a tremendous “increase in the rates of human-induced environmental change” (Whitehead, 2014, p. 144). Providing factual details about the intensification of the greenhouse gases during this period, Whitehead states that

[t]he Great Acceleration can be observed in relation to rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which has increased from 310ppm in 1950 to 400ppm today (half of the increase in anthropogenic carbon dioxide has occurred over the last 30 years), rising levels of dissolved, inorganic nitrogen (used as agricultural fertilizers) in the seas and increases in atmospheric sulphur dioxide concentrations. (2014, p. 144)

Within this spectrum, the third stage of the Anthropocene dates to 2015 (Steffen *et al.*, 2007, p. 618), and it leaves humankind on the edge of taking preliminary yet effective measures to slow down the detrimental course leading towards the irreversible phase of global warming. The previous two stages of the Anthropocene have given us sufficient input to imagine the worst scenario – if radical inertia is not left behind and environmentally sustainable behavior is not promoted. To name just a few, due to the Great Acceleration, the Earth has suffered from various environmental and political problems including climate change, defaunation, nuclear disasters, the gradual annihilation of biodiversity, the impairment of the ecological dynamics, drought, wildfires, floods, as well as the dehumanizing surveillance of technology, wild capitalism, overpopulation, neocolonialism, the Cold War, the hostile polarization of the industrialized countries, oil and water wars, and even the egoistic and somewhat hubristic inclination of the *anthropos* to colonize space. All in all, as humankind gains technological and physical power, it also continues damaging nature and turns itself into a vulnerable target whose future is to be endangered on a permanent level if global temperature reaches “the crucial threshold of 1.5 degrees Celcius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels by as early as 2030” (Miller & Croft, 2018, par. 2). Thus, as the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2016) notes, there is a great paradox in humankind’s rising to the highest level just to prepare its ultimate downfall: “There is, of course, some irony in the fact that one of the species ‘threatened with [at least partial] destruction’ is the human species itself. Humans need to be responsible to themselves, which, as the history of humanity shows, is easier said than done” (p. 390). Accordingly, without assuming a myopic standpoint that runs the risk of feeding humankind’s egoistic inclinations to control the more-than-human world at all costs, it is of utmost importance to internalize the fact that humans are not the masters but the members of a ‘posthuman space of becoming.’ Here, I use the term ‘posthuman space’ as a more enveloping alternative that underscores the co-constitutive and the non-hierarchical set of relations between humans and nonhumans (including organic and inorganic matter). In this way, the long-held dualistic representations pertaining to the artificial nature/culture divide can also be negated.

In order to problematize the nature/culture binary, in his essay “The Climate of History Four Theses,” Chakrabarty (2009) addresses humans first as “geological agents” who have the capacity to implement grand-scale changes on the regular functioning of the Earth system(s) (p. 207). Then, he goes on to emphasize the fact that humankind cannot hold itself exempt from the positive and/or negative changes that result from its geological impetus.

In other words, humans are not only geological forces but also “biological agents” who are bound to meet the dire consequences of their actions on an environmental basis (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 206). Interweaving the (geo/bio)logical faculties of the human through each other, Chakrabarty (2009) deconstructs the distinction “between human and natural histories” (p. 207), and he challenges the materially and semiotically threatening guidelines of the nature/culture division – which has long “allowed humans to look onto their relationship to ‘nature’ through the prism of subject/object relationship” (Chakrabarty 2012, p. 13). Unlike the earlier humanistic projections of the seventeenth-century European Enlightenment, which widens the gap between mind and body, human and nonhuman, culture and nature, self and other by imprisoning the mental and emotional capabilities of the human into a Cartesian dualistic system; the amalgamation of the nature-cultural histories of the Earth, once again, alerts humankind to the need to assume a non-hierarchical outlook in its relationship with the more-than-human world. Therefore, living in the third phase of the Anthropocene and having experienced its (im)material consequences beforehand, it is time to fill in the blanks with the semiotic connotations of this so-called ‘recent age of humankind’: that humans need to re-configure their understanding and interpretation of the more-than-human world and, as Bruno Latour (2014) also contends, they should embrace a posthumanist vision which acknowledges the human-nonhuman continuum on a non-hierarchical and eco-centric platform:

The point of living in the epoch of the Anthropocene is that all agents share the same shape-changing destiny, a destiny that cannot be followed, documented, told, and represented by using any of the older traits associated with subjectivity or objectivity. Far from trying to “reconcile” or “combine” nature and society, the task, the crucial political task, is on the contrary to *distribute* agency as far and in as *differentiated* way as possible—until, that is, we have thoroughly lost any relation between these two concepts of object and subject that are no longer of any interest any more except in a patrimonial sense. (p. 15, emphasis in original)

Therefore, it may be asserted that the material and the semiotic repercussions of the Anthropocene should be evaluated in tandem because they function as magic lanterns that lead the way to a more egalitarian perspective negating the subject/object duality. The material dimensions of the *Anthropocene*, as it has been discussed above, entail the chronological and the physical aspects of *its* developmental phase including the appearance of the human as a (geo/bio)logical agent on the history scene. The semiotic magnitude of the Anthropocene, however, involves the incorporation of a



paradigm shift that validates the acknowledgement of the nonhuman matter as an ‘active’ agent. Only after these two dimensions (material and semiotic) are evaluated together, can it be possible to challenge the hierarchical dissection between humans and nonhumans and to propose an antidote for the fatal illness(es) of *anthropos* which is/are rooted in anthropocentrism. While textual narratives, such as literary works, have been much influential in training humankind’s capacity for empathy and response-ability to the ‘other’; the symbiotic relationship between cinematographic narratives and the Anthropocene can also inspire an eco-friendly demeanor for their audience.

The alignment of Richard Matheson’s novel and the movie *Legend*, therefore, is quite telling in terms of exhibiting the dissolution of the anthropocentric mindset in the face of nonhuman agentic forces – such as viruses and bacteria. To better understand the paradigm shift implemented by the semiotic dimensions of the Anthropocene and how they pave the way for the apprehension of the so-called ‘inert’ matter as an active agent, it is crucial to examine the contemporary philosophical approaches that go beyond ordinary dualism(s) – which are the main components of “the modernist framework of thought, accepting and thinking along the dominant lines of dualist distinctions of mind and matter, soul and body, and culture and nature” (Dophjin & van der Tuin, 2011, p. 391). As a binary bending geological epoch, the Anthropocene – especially in its current phase – can no longer preserve the outdated meaning-making practices of the modernist agenda. Instead, critical posthumanism and its philosophical trajectories – including new materialism(s), ecological postmodernism<sup>6</sup>, and posthuman ecocriticism – should be kept in mind so that the defamiliarizing characteristics of the cinematographic narration in the Anthropocene can be evaluated more thoroughly. Relatedly, elaborating on the defamiliarizing impetus of the cinema and its relation to the Anthropocene, Jennifer Fay (2018) explains that

[t]he Anthropocene is to natural science what cinema, especially early cinema, has been to human culture. It makes the familiar world strange to us by transcribing the dimensionalities of experience into celluloid, transforming and temporally transporting humans and the natural world into an unhomely image. (p. 3)

Nevertheless, as an aesthetically formulated artificial platform, cinema’s projection of the gradually worsening environmental issues of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries has ironically evolved into a mimetic representation the current reality. Hence, far from making the

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<sup>6</sup> See Iovino, S., & Oppermann, S., 2012, “Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity,” *Ecozon@*, 3, 1, 75-91.

familiar world strange to us, cinema and the digital technology in the Anthropocene illustrate how indifferent and hostile humankind has grown to its dwelling space and time. Hence, this study attempts to present an overall analysis of the material and the immaterial trajectories of the Anthropocene before setting out to analyze *Legend* so that it will be possible to implement the regulations of the paradigm change on a concrete basis.

### **3. Philosophical Trajectories of the Anthropocene from a Non-anthropocentric Perspective**

Critical posthumanism, as it is postulated by Pramod K. Nayar (2014), “begins with the assumption that the human incorporates *difference* in the form of other DNA, species and other forms of life, so that its uniqueness is a myth” (p. 13, emphasis in original). In this eco-centric re-formulation of the hierarchical boundaries between humans and nonhumans, human exceptionalism and normative subjectivity are disavowed (Nayar, 2014, p. 19). Critical posthumanism is, thus, “a whole new conceptualization of the human as a more inclusive, non-unitary entity whose boundaries with the world, with other life forms and species, are porous” (Nayar, 2014, p. 47). Accordingly, the blurring of the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman introduces an ecological dimension which sets posthumanism as an ecological critique of anthropocentrism. The ecological “strand of the posthuman thought” (Oppermann, 2016, p. 26) – which Rosi Braidotti (2013) terms as “contemporary critical posthumanism” (p. 47) – is further explained in her book *The Posthuman* (2013) as follows:

An altogether different and powerful source of inspiration for contemporary re-configurations of critical posthumanism is ecology and environmentalism. They rest on an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others. This practice of relating to others requires and is enhanced by the rejection of self-centred individualism. It produces a new way of combining self-interests with the well-being of an enlarged community, based on environmental inter-connections. (p. 47)

So as to understand the reason why posthumanism calls for a self-reflexive understanding that allows humankind to see itself from a much broader perspective, it is significant to contemplate on the need to replace the “nomadic subjectivity” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 49) with a unitary vision that is based on an “enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others,

including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism” (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 49-50). Inspired by ecology and environmentalism, therefore, contemporary critical posthumanism depends on the intersections of material-semiotic dialogue(s) between human and nonhuman agents. In a similar vein, new materialism is also a novel philosophical approach that operates through a critical interaction with the anthropocentric mindset. As Diana Coole (2010) and Samantha Frost (2010) express:

As human beings we inhabit an ineluctably material world. [...] Our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artifacts and natural stuff that populate our environment, as well as on socioeconomic structures that produce and reproduce the condition of our everyday lives. (p. 1)

In such a schema, where human beings are presented as members or parts of a larger system that can either be material or discursive, it is difficult to draw anthropocentric conclusions. As an organic entity, the human consists of separate physical units such as bones, tissues, and organs, and s/he is able to survive thanks to the mutual dialogue and operation among these units. As a social entity, however, the status of the *anthropos* is determined culturally and/or discursively. In other words, s/he is regulated in relation to the exterior factors such as age, gender, the social and the economic background, and even nationality. Here, in both cases – as a physical or a social body – the human is not presented as an ‘autonomous’ and ‘separate’ entity that lives on his/her own. On the contrary, the onto-epistemological status of humankind is shaped in the light of its relationship with the material-semiotic networks including the matter and the meaning. At this point, however, it is also important to “understand how matter matters” (Barad, 2007, p. 122), so that the ego-centric implications of the Anthropocene can be deconstructed – both materially and discursively.

Karen Barad’s approach in dealing with the significance of the matter is revolutionary in that she does not present a clear-cut distinction between the discursive and the natural practices. While postmodernism claims that the only access we have into the ‘meaning’ is through text, and the language has a discursive power in determining how the meaning is fabricated, “the new materialist theorists like Barad theorize matter and discourse through one another” (Oppermann, 2013, p. 56). In this way, Barad does not assume a hostile stance by avoiding or negating the dualisms; on the contrary, she

develops a transversal approach which is more welcoming since it “entails thinking the cultural and the natural together in illuminating ways” (Barad, 2007, p. 135). This method of thought goes in line with the premises of ecological postmodernism, for it also recognizes “the vitality of things in all natural-cultural processes, and the co-extensivity of language and reality” – in addition to perceiving “nature as being primarily constituted of interacting, interrelated phenomena” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, p. 78). Therefore, it is no longer possible to figure out matter as a passive entity that is shaped by an exterior force – such as the language or the *anthropos*. As Barad further argues, “[m]atter is neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agential, not a fixed essence or property of things” (2007, p. 137). In this picture, it is not humankind that attributes agency to things or gives meaning to the matter. It is the matter that shapes and reconfigures itself. For Barad nothing comes before or after another, so there is no ontological hierarchy but “intra-action” between human and/or (non)human agents (2007, p. 33).

Similar to Barad, Jane Bennett also criticizes the so-called human sovereignty over the more-than-human world. She recommends us to think slowly and reconsider the problematic dissection pertaining to the ‘passive’ position of the “dull matter (it, things)” and the ‘active’ representations of the “vibrant life (us, beings)” (2010, p. vii). Instead of bringing ‘matter’ and ‘life’ against each other, Bennett attempts to melt them away in the same pot and proposes the concept, “vital materiality” as an alternative (2010, p. vii). As she describes: “By ‘vitality’ I mean the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (2010, p. viii). In this way, she draws our attention to the agential contribution of the nonhuman bodies and challenges the post-Cartesian vision which sees nature/environment as a lifeless and mechanistic entity.

By bringing the more-than-human ‘assemblages’ into the picture, Bennett tries to think through the life/matter dualism. She claims that there is a certain “thing power” (2010, p. 2) inherent in the nonhuman agents varying from omega-3 fatty acids that alter human mood to electrical power and garbage hills (2010, p. vii). It is this energetic vitality that transforms objects into things and grants them with the capacity to produce effects or to act. This particular way of interpreting the world – as functioning through a web of agents rather than being affected by the presence of a dominate ‘subject’ – redirects our attention to the agential contribution of the nonhuman forces. In

accordance with Barad's use of the term, "intra-action" (2007, p. 33) Bennett's theory of "distributive agency" does not position the 'subject' as the "root cause of an effect," either (2010, p. 31).

Moreover, borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari, the term "assemblage" (1987, p. 4) is also useful in describing the new materialist tendency to challenge the divisions between matter and discourse, nature and culture. Bennett (1987) states that "[a]ssemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within" (pp. 23-24). Arguing that assemblages are not governed by a central head, Bennett urges us to rethink subjectivity and to question the vertical alienation of power. In this way, she "takes the *deus ex machina* of our typical explanations of the world, namely the quasi-divine human being standing over mechanistic nature, and kills the last of the gods" (Gratton, 2010, p. 159). In other words, the new materialist paradigm positions the relation between humans and nonhumans on a horizontal base where the material and the discursive practices are read through one another, and hereby it deconstructs the binary oppositions between subject/self and object/other. Here, one can easily wonder how the Cartesian way of understanding the world is to be revolutionized by this eco-centric frame of thought. Same question also occupies Bennett's mind, for she contemplates as follows:

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These maternal powers which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, enable or degrade us in any case call for attentiveness, or even "respect" (provided that the term be stretched beyond its Kantian sense). The figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption. (2010, p. ix)

To put it more precisely, new materialism(s) – in its non-anthropocentric approach to evaluate agency on a material-semiotic network and via its celebration of the diffractive method of thinking which reads binaries such as mind/matter, soul/body, culture/nature, human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate through each other – redefines human identity and sets it

in relation to all ‘other’ agentic beings. Given the intellectual and philosophical reverberations of the Anthropocene, therefore, it can be deduced that “[t]he Anthropocene perspective on film and media history might be compared to the famous reverse-zoom camera technique” which “involves a dizzying confluence of human and nonhuman perspectives” (Peterson & Uhlin, 2019, p. 145). The ironic juxtaposition of the nonhuman matter versus the ‘legendary’ human ‘subject’ – whose attempts to cure cancer give rise to the emergence of a deadly virus which has the agential faculty to have total control over its hosts by blocking away their ‘humanely’ traits and turning them into vampires – not only serves as a medium to overturn the anthropocentric mindset in *Legend* but also exemplifies the contribution of the cinematographic narratives to reverse the hubristic undercurrents of the Anthropocene back on itself.

#### **4. The Critique of Anthropocentrism in *I Am Legend* (2007)**

Directed by Francis Lawrence and starring the famous Hollywood actor Will Smith (Robert Neville), *I Am Legend* is set in New York City, and it covers the scenes shortly before the outbreak of the vampiric plague in 2009 and the three years after. It is peculiar to witness how New York City, one of the symbolic paragons of technological advancement and modern civilization of the Anthropocene, has turned into a totally deserted landscape which has been re-claimed by nature in such a short period of time. The urban setting of the metropolis stands in dark contrast to the freely roaming wild animals including herds of deer and lions, as well as the lovely songs of the birds in the background and the growth of the unkempt grass on the motorways. The panoramic vision of the city – with its abandoned official buildings, shabby billboard advertisements, long line of automobiles left deserted, and military aircraft parked on navy vessels – demonstrates how the fatal agency of an invisible virus has totally shut everything down. Quite ironically, at the beginning of the movie, Robert Neville is driving a Ford Mustang Shelby (2007) at full speed through the deserted streets of the New York City to hunt deer with his high-tech rifle. He also stops by a cornfield to gather his food with his dog-friend Samantha. It seems the Anthropocene has rewound itself back to the Holocene when humankind was able to survive via its hunter-gatherer abilities. Nevertheless, the dangerous threshold has long been crossed, because in this dystopic setting Neville is the only surviving/immune human being who is left behind in the infected zone to be able to find a cure. Due to the outbreak, 90 percent of the world population is dead, and the

remaining 9 percent has long turned into infected vampiric mutants (Brayton, 2011, p. 67) who are roaming through the streets of the city to hunt for blood at night.

The material and the semiotic dimensions of the Anthropocene can be traced throughout the movie. The material trajectory of the ‘recent age of man’ is related to humankind’s appearance as a (geo/bio)logical agent whose subversive intervention in the regular functioning of the ecosystem turns it into an anti-hero who continues preparing its own downfall. The markers of welfare and civilization – as represented via New York City – have long sunk into nothingness due to the plague. Even the exponential increase in human population has been severely cut and turned inside out because now there is only 1 percent of the human population remaining. Then, it can be asserted that no matter how powerful the *anthropos* projects itself to be, it takes only a short period of time for nature to re-claim what it has lost in the Great Acceleration. In this manner, it is possible to claim that *Legend* warns against radical inertia and short-sightedness. Only through reading the comprehensive scope of the Anthropocene correctly, can humankind come to terms with its own faults and take steps to correct them.

As stated above, it should be noted that the semiotic aspect of the Anthropocene should be analyzed together with its material dimension. All the technological and the scientific advancements as well as the humankind’s increasing prominence on the face of the Earth run the risk of turning the *anthropos* into a desolate being who does not take a note of the agential faculties of the more-than-human world. The semiotic projections of the Anthropocene, however, present humankind with an alternative path that exchanges apathy with empathy. In other words, given the increasing number of the theoretical and philosophical studies that take a clear note of the nonhuman matter as an active force, it can be asserted that humans and nonhumans are bound to be in an intra-active set of relationship in a ‘posthuman space of becoming.’ Within this context, material-semiotic dimension of the Anthropocene acknowledges the capacity of the human agent to implement geological/material changes; however, it also tames the ego-centric impulse encoded within humans via reminding them that they have always been in a continuous enmeshment with the more-than-human world. The vampiric plague’s capacity to infiltrate into the human corpus and to implement a biological mutation show the vulnerability of the *anthropos*. In this manner, the plague can be interpreted as a semiotic code which validates the need to apply a diffractive approach to be able to go beyond the hierarchical dualities pertaining to the Cartesian world.

Colonizing the healthy body of a human, the Krippin Virus (KV), which is named after Dr. Alice Krippin – whose attempts to genetically engineer the measles virus to be able to cure cancer prove fatal in the end – announces its own autonomy and agency by turning itself into a lethal enemy against the human body. In this way, *Legend* enables its audience to acknowledge the vitality encoded in the matter as well as the arbitrary nature of ascribing hierarchical divisions to the dichotomies pertaining to the self/subject/colonizer and the other/object/colonized. As it has been stated above, in a ‘posthuman space of becoming’ where every human and nonhuman entity exist within a diffractive set of alignments, it is not possible to guess the ultimate results of the human intervention in the regular functioning of the natural systems beforehand. Considering the articulation of humankind as a (geo/bio)logical force in the Anthropocene, it would, again, be a naïve stance to assume that humans can continue warranting their status as unshakeable and powerful agents. This hubristic tendency is best exemplified in the analogy introduced by Dr. Krippin in a TV interview: “If you can imagine your body as a highway, and you picture the virus as a very fast car, being driven by a very bad man. Imagine the damage that car could cause. But then if you replace that man with a cop the picture changes, and that’s essentially what we’ve done” (Protosevich, 2007, p. 2). To the dismay of Krippin, however, modern medicine and science are left defenseless before a myriad of permutations and possibilities.

As a virologist and military officer, Robert Neville represents the authority of science and reason against the mind-blocking impetus of the KV. Once the virus infects the human body, it violates the physical and mental capabilities of its host. Analogous to the figure of Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818), Neville continues with his experiments in his home-lab to be able to find an antidote to reverse the process: he sets up traps to capture the vampiric mutants, and after benumbing them under heavy doses of sedatives, he goes on to inject different types of vaccines to test their reaction. Here, the hubristic undertones of the modern medicine and the so-called supremacy of science are subtly criticized through Neville’s reactions and comments in *Legend*. Following up his last capture of an infected female, Neville observes how a male mutant exposes himself to the sunlight to be able to save her. In his anthropocentric vision of the world, Neville is not able to read through the true motivation of the male, because as a dark seeker, the male is nothing other than a monstrous being, i.e., the ‘dark’ doppelganger of the reasonable and healthy human. Hence, in Neville’s vision, the male’s exposure to the sunlight cannot demonstrate his devotion to the captured female, but his anomaly: “It’s possible, decreased brain function or growing



scarcity of food, is causing them to ignore their basic survival instincts. Social devotion appears complete. Typical human behavior is now entirely absent” (Protosevich, 2007, p. 7). In the following day, Neville’s falling prey to a similar trap – which has been set up by the male dark seeker – illustrates how a ‘reasonable’ scientist can easily lose his control in a fit of rage and risk his own life. Neville’s impulsive behavior causes the death of his beloved dog, Samantha, for it is attacked by mutant dogs and gets infected while trying to protect its human companion. Here, it is seen that the lines between Neville and the male dark seeker are not as adamant as they are dictated by the anthropocentric agenda. Neville’s symbolic shortsightedness is also demonstrated towards the end of the movie when a large group of vampiric mutants – commanded by the alpha dark seeker – finds and attacks his house to re-capture the female mutant. In a similar vein, referring to this particular scene, Nicola Bowring (2015) argues that “Neville’s underestimation of their ability to organize, his misconception of the other, ultimately proves his downfall [...] through a false sense of superiority” (p. 135). Obviously, though immune to the KV, Neville is infected with one of the most sinister viruses of the Anthropocene – which is egocentrism and metaphysical inertia. The impetus of the cinema in the time of the Anthropocene, therefore, should entail an eco-centric vision that sees beyond the artificial dualities of the so-called ‘modern civilization.’

Testifying its title, the movie *I Am Legend* concludes with Neville’s decision to kill himself together with the alpha dark seeker and his ‘invading’ army – which in the end turns him into a ‘legendary’ figure sacrificing himself for the future generations. Just before his death, Neville is able to pass the antidote Anna and Ethan so that they will be able to take it to the survivors’ colony and commemorate the self-sacrifice of their hero:

In 2009 a deadly virus burned through our civilization, pushing humankind to the edge of extinction. Dr. Robert Neville dedicated his life to the discovery of a cure and the restoration of humanity. On September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012, at approximately 8:49 P.M., he discovered that cure. And at 8:52, he gave his life to defend it. We are his legacy. This is his legend. Light up the darkness. (Protosevich, 2007, p. 16)

However, considering the material and semiotic dimensions of the Anthropocene, it would be a reductionist approach to conclude that *Legend* justifies its title in a positive manner. On the contrary, reading between the scenes, it is seen that the movie does not simply confirm the image of a heroic ‘subject’ whose death warrants the well-being of the planet. In a posthuman space, everything is in a state of flux, and the inhabitants of this spatiotemporal process continue intra-acting in a myriad of forms. As the

viruses and germs continue mutating, all human and nonhuman life forms – including animate and inanimate matter – will be bound by various (im)material trajectories that underline the need to develop a more egalitarian and eco-centric perspective. Cinematographic narration in the time of the Anthropocene, therefore, proves itself as a useful medium to reflect on the changing dynamics peculiar to a ‘posthuman space of becoming’ which is always in a state of constant flux.

## 5. Conclusion

Reading the material and the semiotic trajectories of the Anthropocene side by side in *Legend*, it has been attempted to demonstrate the multi-layered projections of the human-nonhuman continuum via a mutant virus. As a geological force, humans are responsible for affecting the regular well-being of the ecological system negatively; however, they cannot escape from the detrimental consequences of their mutual entanglement with the more-than-human world. In this manner, the agential impetus of the Krippin Virus demonstrates how the nonhuman matter (which has been ironically formulated by a human agent) re-writes and re-creates itself in a plethora of possibilities. The uncontrollable energy of the virus brings the material and the semiotic aspects of the Anthropocene together: it is a material outcome of Dr. Alice Krippin’s scientific experiments with the measles virus – which can also be compared to humankind’s increasing impetus on a geological scale; on the other hand, the virus also operates as a semiotic agent which testifies the corporeal and the cultural fragility of the *anthropos*.

Within this perspective, as opposed to the image of an autonomous, self-willed individual, the human should be re-evaluated as an assemblage that co-exists and co-evolves with other forms of life. In this way, posthumanism “signals a renewed interest in the biological world, ideas of human animality and our kinship with other creatures” (Feder, 2014 p. 226). Likewise, critical posthumanism and ecocriticism decenter the traditional human subject and underline his/her liminal status within a posthuman space. Still, as Helena Feder (2014) argues, “ecocriticism’s radical challenge lies not only in recognizing other forms of subjectivity and the ecological interconnectedness of these biologically diverse subjects, but in recognizing that relations between them are *political*—they are life and death relations” (p. 227, emphasis in original). Accordingly, the human ‘self’ can no longer be regarded as an all-powerful autonomous being, on the contrary, s/he is nothing other than a form of species among many others. As a creative outlet,

therefore, cinema is an effective tool in illustrating the dialogue between the human and the nonhuman agents of the Anthropocene, and the changing dynamics of the ‘recent age of man’ calls for a new conceptualization of the human on a material and philosophical ground. In other words, non-anthropocentric trajectories of the Anthropocene are concerned with going beyond the outdated reflections of an anthropocentric mindset that puts humankind on the highest pedestal and transforms it into a ‘legendary’ character; thereby, cutting all its connection with the material/physical world. In *Legend*, however, it has been demonstrated that as a (geo/bio)logical agent, the human ‘subject’ cannot reduce itself into a totally abstract or concrete image. Instead, it is a total sum of all the binaries brought together. Perhaps it is the reason why, the ultimate vaccine that is invented by the military scientist Robert Neville turns out to be a hybridized/enmeshed formulation that consists both of his blood and the blood of the vampiric mutant.

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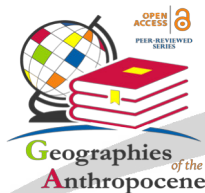
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The Anthropocene concept identifies a geological era in which human action leads to changes on a planetary scale with long-term irreversible effects. This volume collects insights into geographical research, with a specific look at the challenges of the future, and the potential of visual communication offered by cinema, documentaries and television series. In fact, fiction could represent the appropriate medium to examine the notions of the Anthropocene, being a language of global diffusion and highly evocative since it uses the engagement of narration and entertainment to convey messages of vital importance, arousing emotions in the viewer, shared awareness and, finally, responsibility. In the Anthropocene era, the challenge of climate change is not a problem of science but a failure of politics. And politics fails because the Great Acceleration has led to the good life and certainly a better life for people everywhere. Who is willing to give up the great stuff of the Great Acceleration? What would that new life look like? What kind of challenges does the future propose? Some of these questions, among others, are raised in the chapters of the present volume. The different geographical contexts and approaches, here collected, can play an important clarifying function, to reduce the complexity of (today's) social, economic, political, and technological reality, presenting a much deeper vision of reality than it appears to us, and at the same time offering us the means to navigate it. Thus, the volume deals with these issues in three sections, moving from narrative methods to the representation of ecological disasters and finally analysing a more specific topic.

***Enrico Nicosia** is a Full Professor in Geography at the Department of Cognitive Science, Psychology, Education and Cultural Studies at University of Messina (southern Italy). The scientific activity is documented by numerous publications in various fields of geography. The main research topics focus on sustainable land development policies and the role of the social-economic components on urban regeneration strategies, related to the organization of large events. His recent studies are directed at: the urban redevelopment, the transformation of the spaces of consumption, and Film induced tourism.*

***Lucrezia Lopez** Lucrezia Lopez is Lecturer of Geography at the Department of Geography of the University of Santiago de Compostela (USC) and secretary of the CETUR (Centro de Estudios Turísticos). She is academic coordinator in the USC of the International Master's Degree in City Challenges, and secretary of its international academic commission. Her research lines concern the Camino de Santiago, studied by a plurality of geographic, cultural and touristic approaches. She also deals with cultural and Mediterranean studies, tourism geography, heritage and heritage management, and geohumanities.*



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