

Killing off Humanity – Ethics and Aesthetics in Garland/Boyle’s Apocalyptic Thrillers *28 Days Later* and *Sunshine*

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At first sight, *28 Days Later* (2002) and *Sunshine* (2007), both written by Alex Garland and directed by Danny Boyle, have nothing much in common, neither thematically nor aesthetically: *28 Days* is a postapocalyptic zombie-film derivative, shot with digital cameras, resulting in wobbly, badly lighted and grainy pictures. *Sunshine*, on the contrary, is a pre-apocalyptic thriller set in space, which stands in the visually polished tradition of Kubrick’s *2001: Odyssey in Space* (1968), utilizing highly aesthetic pictures, exquisite lighting and long takes, and is much quieter than its predecessor.

Whereas the classic Zombie-Film genre could not do without comical elements, and was primarily interested in fun-packed gory action, the new British horror-thriller raises a number of hotly contested ethical questions. In *28 Days* a group of survivors tries to stay alive in a post-apocalyptic Britain almost wiped out by a virus called “Rage”, which turns its victims into mindless predators within seconds. *Sunshine* depicts the voyage of the space-ship *Icarus II* en route to the failing sun with the mission to reignite it by means of a giant atomic charge, and thereby prevent Earth from falling into an ice-age.

Both films are about survival, but the stakes are uneven: Whereas *28 Days* concentrates on a small group in a localized area, mainland Britain turning out to have been quarantined from the rest of the world, *Sunshine* is about the survival of the whole planet. The resulting ethical questions both cater for audience’s fears of biological and environmental threats.

In the following, I will attempt to deal with some of the ethical issues. I want to suggest that both films abandon ironical distancing devices common to their genre, and instead directly attack the audience’s nerves and stomachs with plots containing high levels of blood and guts, laced with highly politicized ethical subtexts.

The catastrophic events in *28 Days Later* unfold when a militant group of animal-rights activists attempts to free some chimpanzees from a laboratory. The infected chimps attack the activists and infect them with the “Rage-virus”, which subsequently spreads across Britain. 28 days after these events, Jim, a bicycle courier, wakes up in hospital to find the whole city of London apparently deserted. The plot evolves around Jim and his efforts to stay alive in the hostile environment.

At a first glance, the story-world of *28 Days Later* bears a telling resemblance to the well established zombie film genre, and thus offers nothing much new. The idea of the last men and women on earth, bravely battling the undead and, as a side effect, enjoying the pleasures of being allowed to do anything they like in a world without laws, has inspired a whole genre: An early example is George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), in which zombies, lumbering amiably about a shopping mall while still clutching their shopping-bags, provides an ironical commentary on modern consumer society.

However, *28 Days Later* differs in some crucial aspects, which bring the events closer to home, as it were. The fact that the infected are not dead, but very much alive and incredibly fast, and that they display signs of rudimentary intelligence, can be attributed to the demands of the audience for ever increasing levels of action and horror.¹ In the same move, however, the virus also spreads incredibly fast, infecting its victim in a matter of seconds, and this directly taps into currently widespread anxieties about possible epidemics caused by a mutating

¹ The trend of the zombie’s increased speed and aggression, started in the 1980s with films by Dan O’Bannon and Lamberto Bava, continues in more recent genre productions such as Zack Snyder’s 2004 remake of George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*.

virus. Together with the ever-increasing worry about terrorism after “9/11”, the film sits astride our current “culture of fear” (Toth & Brooks 2007: 3).

In the following, I will take the post-apocalyptic *tabula rasa* in *28 Days Later* as a starting point from which to develop my reading of the film as a reflection on the ethical questions the individual is faced with when all social conventions have fallen apart. What I want to argue is that the film’s hard-edged aesthetics go hand in hand with a direct and unironical rendering of the “dehumanizing” consequences a post-apocalyptic scenario can have on the moral framework of the protagonists. In a post-ethical world in which the only means of staying alive is the use of brute force, the age-old dictum of *homo homini lupus est* rings rather hollow, of course. Needless to say, the film abounds in this type of well trodden cultural pessimism, but also reflects seriously on the consequences of this concept, and offers a way out.

In order to exemplify these competing currents in the film, I want to focus on two main points which are closely interrelated: the development of the two main characters, and the dubious role of the military post the survivors seek refuge in.

Jim soon meets Selina, a tough and streetwise young woman who has learnt to survive in the brutal environment by adopting an equal brutality: “Plans are pointless”, she declares, “staying alive’s as good as it gets.” She has no qualms about instantly killing her companion Mark when he becomes infected, and she makes one thing very clear to Jim: “If it happens to you, I’ll do it in a heart-beat.” She will only tolerate a companion who does not slow her progress. On these egoistical principles, she strongly opposes joining the Taxi-driver Frank and his young daughter Hannah in their search for a military post outside Manchester. A radio-broadcast promises that “the answer to infection” lies there. Selina is persuaded to go with them, although she thinks that Frank and Hannah are a liability. The contrast between Jim’s and Selina’s ethical standards is underscored by Jim saying that Frank and Hannah are “good people”, to which Selina retorts: “Well, that’s nice, but you should be more concerned about whether they’re going to slow you down.” This discussion neatly sums up the binary nature of the options: survival of the fittest as opposed to survival of the group.

On their journey north, Jim is attacked by an infected boy whom he is forced to kill. This marks his initiation into the act of killing. They finally arrive at the military post – a manor-house which has been converted into a veritable fortress. However, the soldiers defending it display a dubious morality: They show signs of loose discipline and very much enjoy shooting the Infected, who attack sporadically. Their commander, tellingly named Major West, proudly shows Jim an infected comrade called Mailer, whom they keep chained up in the yard in order to study how long he can survive without food. The fact that Mailer is the only black soldier in the camp and wears a chain around his neck triggers certain ambivalent connotations. During supper, West philosophizes about there being nothing abnormal about the virus in the first place – a disturbing subtext to the film:

This is what I’ve seen in the four weeks since infection: People killing people – which is much what I saw in the four weeks before infection and the four weeks before that and before that. As far back as I can remember – people killing people, which to my mind puts us back in a state of normality right now.

This thesis is underscored by the film’s establishing shot, which shows an ape in the testing facility which is forced to watch pictures of mass-violence across the globe.

It soon becomes apparent that the soldier’s friendly welcome for the women is more than mere courtesy. West explains to Jim that he has “promised them women” in order to keep up morale. When Jim resists this plan, the soldiers take him to be shot, while preparing to rape Selina and Hannah, who they both force to wear elegant dresses for the occasion. Jim escapes and starts a killing spree among the soldiers. He unleashes Mailer who subsequently hunts about and infects many of his former comrades. The film cunningly suggests that this is

an act of revenge. In the resulting carnage, Jim kills one of the meanest soldiers, who is still uninfected, by squeezing his eyes out – an act of power Jim obviously enjoys. As she promised, Selina is about to kill Jim “in a heart-beat” because he looks infected, being wild-eyed and smeared with blood. Her affection for him makes her pause long enough to see he is all right, however, and the three escape to a pastoral cottage and are discovered by a search-plane.

So much for the brief plot summary. Ethical boundaries between good and bad are blurred – the military turns out to be just as beastly and dehumanized as the Infected –, only to be reinstated again at the close of the film. The film ends with an almost complete reversal of gender-roles and the restoration of formerly disrupted ethical norms: Selina has transformed from hardened fighter into caring mother-figure for Hannah (Hannah’s dad Frank became infected and was killed by the soldiers), while Jim has changed from a frightend “softy” into a man capable of ruthless killing. Selina’s development is, however, ironically undercut by the grotesquely feminine dress she is forced to wear when she promises to protect Hannah. This hyperbolic restoration of gender stereotypes, arguably the weakest part of the film, does no harm to the final message: The pastoral and tranquil scene at the end, in which Jim, Selina and Hannah live happily together as a small patchwork family, can be read as the triumph of ethical care for self and others over the principle of survival at all costs.

The fact that Garland and Boyle had originally planned a negative ending, in which Jim dies,² and this version having been rejected by a test audience, goes to show how much the contemporary viewer is fascinated by post-ethical and/or apocalyptic scenarios, but is all too eager to scuttle back under the canvas of clear-cut moral distinctions between right and wrong.

As I already mentioned in the introduction, *Sunshine* takes a somewhat quieter approach, deriving its tension more from conflicts between the crew members. As the mission of the *Icarus II* to save Earth goes from bad to worse, the multi-ethnic crew is faced with some tricky ethical decisions.

Trouble starts when the *Icarus II* picks up a signal from its predecessor, the *Icarus I*, which disappeared a couple of years ago while on the same mission to reignite the sun. After much discussion, the crew decide to alter their course in order to retrieve the other ship’s nuclear bomb and to stand better chances of completing their mission. During their change of course, Trey, the navigational officer, commits an error which endangers both ship and crew. In order to correct the damage, captain Kaneda and Capa, the bomb-specialist, volunteer to go outside. They succeed in repairing the damaged heat shield, but at the cost of Kaneda’s life, who consents to being sacrificed as the computer turns the massive heat-shield back into the sun’s light to protect the ship. The decision to turn back the shield and thereby sacrifice their captain is backed by the grim engineer Mace, who repeatedly defends the priority of their mission over individual life. He has to argue with the others, who’d rather opt for saving the life of their comrade first.

If this summary so far gives the impression that the story is about self-sacrifice and patriotic heroism, this is far from the case. The main characters are shown to be under immense psychological pressure, and the film devotes a lot of time to depicting the hesitation, heated discussions, and the fears of the crew members as they struggle against the odds.

Things worsen when the ship’s oxygen-garden is destroyed by a fire as a result of the damage done to the ship. The crew now do not have enough air to complete the mission. Trey blames himself dreadfully for all this and has to be sedated in order to be prevented from harming himself. The crew see no other option but to continue on their way to meet the *Icarus I*, hoping that she has enough oxygen-supplies left. Some of the crew enter the appar-

² Cf. Boyle’s audio-commentary on the DVD-release of the film.

ently deserted ship to find its inhabitants pulverized to dust by the unfiltered heat of the sun. Deferring to "God's will" under the leadership of Captain Pinbacker, they destroyed their computer, rendering their bomb useless, and committed suicide by opening the observation lounge's protective vizor. Back on board their ship, the crew discuss their oxygen problem. Corazon, the ship's botanist, puts it bluntly: "If Trey dies, we'll have the oxygen to make it to the delivery point." They cast a vote to kill Trey, but the ship's pilot Cassie cannot bring herself to vote unanimously with the others. Mace wants to do it in spite of there being no consensus, but he finds Trey already dead, apparently having committed suicide.

To Capa's astonishment, the computer announces that they have another crew member aboard. It turns out to be Captain Pinbacker, who has sneaked aboard believing it is God's will that he should sabotage the mission, and he attempts to do so by disabling the ship's computer and killing off its crew one by one. The film reveals that he killed Trey. Pinbacker is horribly burnt and can only be seen through a blur of heat and radiance. As the ship hurtles towards the core of the sun and the physical laws of space and time disintegrate due to the enormous speed and increasing gravity, Capa and Cassie battle with Pinbacker. Capa manages to ignite the bomb, and is engulfed by the explosion. The last sequence shows a wintry earth being lighted up by the reignited sun.

Both films' treatment of such controversial ethical questions as the value of a single life compared to the lives of many, or religious doubts about interfering with nature, reveal a deep concern that goes beyond carefree postmodern relativism. Both films manage the balancing-act of conveying current ethical and political questions into a convincing dystopia. They both employ hard-edged aesthetics, and deny the audience the clear-cut messages and unambiguous endings often found in other productions of the genre. In my reading, the concept of a post-ethical void features prominently in both films. I want to conclude by pairing ethics with aesthetics:

In *28 Days Later* the Rage-virus has wiped out all moral inhibitions, both in the Infected, and, more importantly, in the few survivors, leaving Britain (the virus manages the jump across the channel in the sequel *28 Weeks Later*) a place in which care and respect for others are either erased completely or in very short supply. The safe haven Selina, Jim and Hannah finally escape to is consequently shot in rich bright colours and thus appears unreal in contrast with the previous aesthetic bleakness.

Both moral and aesthetic bleakness are present in *Sunshine* as well, albeit in a rather different form: The coldness of space is reflected by the ship's interior, which is mostly either a glaring white or dim and almost totally devoid of colour. This provides a stark contrast to the frequent shots of the sun's brightness and warm colours. The vastness of empty space engulfing ship and crew has nothing adventurous or beautiful about it, as in many other productions of the genre, but instead is depicted as a threatening and merciless environment, in which the human frame is either roasted by the sun or frozen to death. The team of *Icarus II* struggle to hold together but are ultimately unable to give each other much human warmth to compensate for the "social and ethical vacuity" (Toth & Brooks 2007: 4) surrounding them. This becomes apparent in the recurrent physical confrontations between Capa and Mace. Only when it is almost too late and Pinbacker is already upon them, do they begin to successfully pull together – however, every crew member dies alone, far away from the others.

In effect, the supposedly self-sacrificing heroism of many of the crew-members is not primarily pressed on them by circumstances, but by their individual fascinations: Captain Kaneda and psychologist Searle are vapourized by the sun, captivated by its brilliance, while botanist Corazon is infatuated with plants. She is so thrilled to find a surviving bud in the burnt out green-house that she forgets everything around her and therefore easily falls prey to

Pinbacker. Finally, Capa thinks the bomb's explosion would be a "beautiful sight", and is happy to experience it first hand in the film's hypnotic finale.

The apocalyptic settings of both films thus directly deal with one of the guiding questions of this conference: "[...] how can politically just and ethical actions be constituted and legitimized - when there are no more (religious, metaphysical, anthropologic) grands récits that traditionally served as their foundation?"³ Both films can be read as defending traditional ethical norms, closely linked to Modernism by Zygmunt Bauman (1993: 10), in a "postmodern" environment devoid of these norms. They incorporate postmodernism's challenge of traditional norms by showing their protagonist's struggle for humane decisions in inhumane surroundings, and offer no simple solutions to these dilemmas. In confronting the ethical questions head-on, both films can be seen as implicitly contributing to a larger movement concerned with defending the project of Modernity against postmodern relativism, however this movement is "tempered by the lessons of postmodernism" (Toth & Brooks 2007: 8). Bauman (1993: 32) aptly sums up the goal of this "ethical turn":

Rather than reiterating that there would be no moral individuals if not for the training/drilling job performed by society, we move towards the understanding that it must be the moral capacity of human beings that makes them so conspicuously capable to form societies and against all odds to secure their – happy or unhappy – survival.

This is precisely the reason why the crew in *Sunshine* do not survive: They cannot overcome their egoistical drives, resulting in their lonely deaths.

In *28 Days*, survival is happy: Society outside Hannah's, Selina's and Jim's pastoral retreat has proven self-destructive. The bloody finale among the classical Greek statues in the ghostly manor marks the end of society as we know it. Into this cultural and ethical void the film places the postmodern patchwork family, and underscores this by uniting old and new in a subtle visual metaphor: Selina is shown putting together sheets to form a huge "HELLO" on the lawn for the search planes to see. Sown into this gigantic white patchwork fabric is a tiny streak of red – the humiliating gala dress Selina was forced to wear by the soldiers.

Secondary sources:

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³.From the conference web-page.