A TALE OF TWO VERSIONS—
I AM LEGEND (2007) AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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Abstract: *Based on a comparative reading of the officially released version and the director's cut of Francis Lawrence's movie* I Am Legend *(2007a; 2007b), the present contribution interrogates possible connections between the political economy of film production and aesthetic form. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model and Artz' critical study of global entertainment industries, and combining these with an analysis of Lawrence's two versions, I argue that profit-oriented adaptations to implied market pressures are not neutral endeavours, but inherently political acts that shape aesthetic form to, often-tacitly, reiterate a received hegemonic status quo.*

Keywords: I Am Legend *(2007)*; *propaganda model*; *Hollywood*; *cultural production*; *othering*; *test-screenings*; *liminal space*.

Introduction

The present tale of two versions is essentially a story of emphasis. Contrasting the officially released version of Francis Lawrence's Hollywood action-flic *I Am Legend* (2007a) with a director's cut that has only subsequently been made available on a DVD edition, I investigate, how the profit-orientation of a global film industry translates into aesthetic form that then invites hegemonic potentials of meaning and practice. Last-minute alterations to the cinema version of Lawrence's film were aimed at making the product digestible to mainstream audiences thus securing financial revenues. In addition, however, these changes also align the narrative to hegemonic discursive frames of othering and violent exclusion proving that market-oriented adaptations of cultural products are not politically neutral endeavours.

   Hence, a focus on emphasis. The title of the film—*I Am Legend*—is also the last sentence in Matheson's 1954 novel upon which Lawrence's film is based: "[I am] a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever. I am legend" (Matheson 1954: 160). I argue that the officially released version puts emphasis on 'I'—*I* am legend—to reiterate the importance of the individual hero of the story who, in this particular version, sacrifices himself to save humankind. In contrast, the director's cut puts emphasis on the last word—I am *legend*—to highlight, in line with the novel's original narrative, the dawning awareness of the main protagonist that, rather than being the hero in a Manichean struggle for survival against an evil enemy, in reality he himself acted as the legendary demon killing apparently monstrous, yet still living and thinking beings in their sleep. The following text is the story of this shift in emphasis, its probable reasons, and potential implications.

The Political Economy of Cultural Production

Ever since Stuart Hall's (1977) studies on how received discourses, available technologies, and established relations of power and production predispose both form and reception of cultural expressions, it has been accepted wisdom that material conditions and political economy matter for artistic creations and their possible implications and effects—that the fields of aesthetics, economy, and politics are intrinsically intertwined. According to Hall, the formal features of television programmes are shaped and understood in complex contexts that tie down the freedom of active producers and audiences, but do not determine their activities in the last instance. However neatly structured and composed a specific cultural expression might be, it can always be read against the grain or placed in new and potentially subversive contexts. Hall develops an understanding of production and reception as active and situated processes that are influenced by a variety of factors. In the present contribution, I show how the political economy of contemporary Hollywood cinema impacts upon aesthetic form, and investigate the role of pre-screenings with test audiences in these processes.

In his critique of the ideological implications of transnational media corporations, Artz (2015) writes that

> any music, movie, art, political discourse, or social commentary that passes through corporate media filters must meet the prerequisites of mass entertainment and profit, thereby weakening and undermining any political edge, class independence, or democratic potential (13).

Arguing that "all entertainment carries kernels of cultural values, social norms, and political ideology" (4), Artz asserts a fundamental significance of cultural expressions for politics and democracy at a global scale. Throughout his book, he shows among other things how mainstream media take part in establishing and maintaining a cultural form of hegemony that can productively harness, for instance, issues of diversity yet at an underlying level rearticulates these in individualist terms as such leaving pressing questions of ownership, economic exploitation, power, and collective action untouched. As a result, argues Artz, mainstream culture predominantly reiterates a received status quo in political and economic terms.

Given his theme and overall critical outlook regarding the material conditions for media production in global capitalism, it is surprising that Artz (2015) refrains from referring to the work of Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]) who have made similar points before and who have developed a terminology centred precisely on the term filter invoked by Artz (2015) in the quote above. The reason for this omission can possibly be found in the fact that Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]) focused on the political economy of news production and dissemination with main focus on the US, while Artz (2015) directs attention to global entertainment industries (mainstream television and film).

Herman and Chomsky (2002 [1988]) studied the institutional logics behind what they perceive as a significant political bias of major US news media. Providing wide empirical evidence for imbalanced reporting, they identify five filters through which potential news items need to pass and that influence both form and content of the

disseminated messages—[*1*] ownership, size and profit-orientation of the production company, [*2*] the economic importance of advertising, [*3*] sourcing, [*4*] flak, and [*5*] anti-*ism. In their studies, they show how each filter operates and how they interact to reproduce a hegemonic image of capitalism, US foreign policy and military interventions, as well as political, economic, and cultural elites as inherently benevolent factors and as subservient to an allegedly universal greater good. In spite of sustained criticism (e.g. Brahm 2006), the model is today widely acknowledged as a viable analytical tool enabling a critical understanding of the role of mainstream media in capitalist systems (Krüger 2013; Robinson 2015; Zollmann 2018).

In line with the arguments offered by Alford (2011; 2015), I believe that Herman and Chomsky's approach can be used to throw light upon the conditions of emergence of ideological biases not only of supposedly factual news items, but also of mainstream fiction film and, indeed, cultural expressions in general. Through a combination of the propaganda model with the works of Artz and Alford, I take up the question of how the profit orientation of global entertainment industries translates into artistic form that then builds up and disseminates certain potentials for meaning in line with dominant interests.

The identified dynamic is an effect of the structural conditions under which the contemporary mainstream film industry operates and brings to light a form of power that is not wielded by distinct autonomous actors but that still serves particular interests. This form of power is hegemonic—it is "constituted *organically* [...] throughout society" (Mosco 2009 [1996]: 206; emphasis in original) and is based on largely-implicit consent rather than coercion. It is reproduced through intrinsic mechanisms such as profit-orientation and return-of-investment calculations based on the assumed tastes of specific mainstream audiences rather than through open censorship or overt political directives.

Through an analysis that compares and contrasts the officially released version of the Hollywood action movie *I Am Legend* (Lawrence 2007a) with a director's cut that was made available via a later DVD edition, I will demonstrate how economic considerations streamline commercial cultural products and illustrate how the filters profit orientation and anti-*ism operate in practice.

Self and Other in Hollywood Cinema (and Beyond)

Hegemonic mainstream tastes, including their political and ideological biases, constitute narrow frames for allegedly creative industries. Today, any divergence from tested and tried conventions that might alienate hegemonic audiences implies a financial risk that few major studios are willing to take (Artz 2015; Alford 2011; Alford 2015). Major productions are regularly submitted to various forms of corporate pre-testing and pre-screening leading to often severe changes in manuscripts and final products that might radically break with the intentions of directors and script writers. In spite of overall differences in outlook, both Artz (2015) and Marich (2013) agree that, in the industry, the financial bottom-line predisposes both content and aesthetic form. However, while Marich's (2013) merely instrumental approach remains oblivious of the politico-ideological implications of this profit-orientation, Artz (2015) show how the political economy of a globalised entertainment sector constantly pushes products into maintaining and reiterating a received status quo.

In his book, Artz (2015: 200–213) shows how economic considerations impact upon form and content of commercial mainstream cinema. He identifies five key thematic threads prevalent in most of the released films' narratives: [*1*] the imminent presence of severe threats and dangers, [*2*] citizens as inherently powerless victims, [*3*] individual heroes who [*4*] exert a justified form of violence, and [*5*] thereby reassert a received status quo in the end usually reinforcing conservative gender roles, family relations, as well as established political and economic conditions. According to Artz, adherence to these genre templates not only adjusts works to assumed audience expectations thus reducing the financial risks of film production, but also ideologically and politically re-aligns them to the very hegemonic order from which the product emerged in the first place.

And, the discursive and cultural frames set by mainstream cinema matter. Misek (2008: 123), for instance, connects the Hollywood war film's genre conventions to the cultural frames legitimating actual wars. He writes that generic war films "restrict themselves to one point-of-view" and thereby "propagate the unnatural divisions that cause war in the first place". In a similar manner, Der Derian (2002: 110) asserted that "more than rational calculations of interests take us to war. People go to war because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine, and speak of others; that is, how they construct the difference of others as well as the sameness of themselves through representation". In a critique of Hollywood war and action cinema, I concluded in a similar manner arguing that the genres offer easily accessible "interpretative schemata that inform political discourse in that they tacitly order and disambiguate confusing and complex political environments and challenges" (Pötzsch 2013: 142).[1]

In sum, it can be argued that popular culture functions like an implicit background of meaning—a horizon of plausibility—that makes certain understandings and options for action appear viable and sound while others are brought to emerge as strange, less convincing, or outright ridiculous. As such, cultural expressions do not determine subjects. Rather, they resemble tacit patterns of support and restraint that offer apparently valid and easily applicable, familiar frames for understanding and, this way, incrementally move the entire system of interpretation into a particular direction. Factors at the level of political economy play a key role in these processes of maintaining and reinforcing a cultural form of hegemony.

As among others Hall (1977) has reminded us, cultural expressions merely offer potentials for meaning and understanding that are actively negotiated in situated contexts of reception. As such, any mainstream film can, with some effort, be enlisted in progressive political projects. However, this endeavour takes an amount of energy and dedication the average leisure-seeking spectator might not be able or willing to invest. Therefore, to suggest that a majority of spectators will be inclined to passively reproduce the dominant meaning potentials that are systematically invited through mainstream culture does not imply the assumption that spectators are slavishly bound by an ideological cinematic apparatus. Hegemonic frames of meaning and practice can always be challenged. Such a challenge, however, is not invited by mainstream culture's

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[1] All the authors mentioned in the section above interrogate special cases of orientalism—the institutional and discursive construction of a Western self in opposition to a narrowly framed largely imaginary Eastern other—that has been identified and described in detail by Said (1978).

aesthetic form and therefore demands an active spectatorship with the necessary resources to deconstruct implied messages and content (Hall 1977; Kellner/Ryan 1990).

How do hegemonic frames for meaning and interpretation emerge? In earlier studies inspired by neo-formalist film analysis (e.g. Thompson 1988; Bordwell 2006), I have analysed how Hollywood war and action films strategically deploy a variety of formal devices to constantly reiterate a basic story template centred upon a particular relation between what is framed as an honest and true soldier-self and an inherently evil, threatening, and incomprehensible enemy-other (Pötzsch 2010; Pötzsch 2013). Based on Smith's (1995) studies of character engagement in film, I have shown that narrative tropes such as the evil deed committed by a de-humanised enemy or the unexpected event enforcing direct violent encounters between self and other, together with an uneven distribution of such techniques as slow motion, dwelling close-ups, flashback sequences, focalisation, and sad or valorising music among others give rise to a biased structure of engagement that systematically motivates audience sympathy and empathy with one side of the conflict. Meanwhile, the enemy-other is confined to an inaccessible beyond cordoned off by an 'epistemological barrier' that precludes access to the alternative perspectives, the individuality, and indeed humanity of the opponents (Pötzsch 2010: 69; Pötzsch 2013: 129–131). Drawing upon the work of Butler (2009), I have argued that this specific aesthetics of mainstream cinema plays into cognitive and discursive frames of war, rendering implicit plausibility to political articulations presenting all kinds of others as ungrievable and therefore disposable life—a form of anti-*ism producing monstrous adversaries and unworthy victims in the terms of Hermann and Chomsky (2002).

Filmmaking in Hollywood is an industry-style endeavour. However, also the Hollywood studio system can produce works at odds with received hegemonic frames and this way problematise its own genre conventions and their relation to politics (see for instance Misek 2008). In earlier studies, I have identified liminal characters and liminal spaces as key devices of estrangement[2] inviting for such a critical dismantling of generic forms of othering in mainstream film (Pötzsch 2010: 72–77). The term liminal here refers to border-crossing individuals and shared locations in the diegetic universes of war and action films. Both can estrange, and thereby question and challenge, received frames of de-humanisation and exclusion in that they enable the voice and identity of the previously confined other to emerge and assert its relevance. Locations that make possible direct non-violent encounters between self and other and characters that can provide inside perspectives on the rationalities and considerations of both opposing groups invite mutual understanding and an acceptance of the other as fellow human being. As such, these tropes subvert the epistemological barriers of the genre that present the other as "ubiquitously absent" (Pötzsch 2013: 135–137, 139–140, 142)—as inaccessible and hardly ever seen, yet still a potentially omnipresent deadly threat—thereby inviting for a problematisation of violence and de-humanisation in film and beyond.

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[2] The term estrangement is derived from Russian formalism and in particular the work of Viktor Shklovsky (1965 [1919]). It denotes the capacity of art to surprise the viewer and thereby enforce a de-habitualisation of the apparently well-known thus facilitating a new and more reflected seeing. Thompson (1988) has used the term for a neo-formalist analysis of Hollywood film.

The following readings are guided by these considerations and apply the methodological template introduced above to an analysis of Lawrence's *I Am Legend*. I show how both versions set up and negotiate epistemological barriers and liminal elements, and flesh out the opposing meaning potentials invited by their respective cinematic forms. The identified differences will then be connected back to the economy and politics of Hollywood filmmaking.

"They Won't Stop!"—Demonising the Other in the Officially Released Version of Lawrence's *I Am Legend* (2007)

The film *I Am Legend* (Lawrence 2007a) follows elite military scientist Robert Neville (played by Will Smith), the presumably last human survivor on Earth, in his struggle to find a cure against a virus that has killed virtually all of mankind and transformed most of those remaining into sinister vampires preying upon the living during night time. Lawrence's movie is the last in a series of adaptations of Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend* and has been greeted as a straightforward genre movie fulfilling the related expectations.[3] Interestingly, the movie has been officially released in a version that not only entails severe narrative inconsistencies, but also breaks with key elements of Matheson's novel.

In Lawrence's film, the story is focalised through main character Robert Neville—the lone survivor of the plague—who, accompanied by a German shepherd dog, follows his daily routines in an apparently de-populated New York. Hiding in his fortified home during night time, he uses the days to gather supplies and catch vampire specimen for his experiments aimed at eradicating the disease. According to Moya and López (2017: 5), this setting brings forth Lawrence's Neville as a "Cartesian figure, […] a Crusoe and a Dr. Frankenstein figure at the same time".

During the course of two earlier screen adaptations—Ubaldo Ragona's dark and haunting *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and Boris Sagal's action-flic *The Omega Man* (1971)—and culminating in the cinema version of Lawrence's film, a gradual militarisation and 'elitisation' of the main protagonist can be observed. As such, Neville transforms from a plant worker in Matheson's book to a scientist in Ragona's movie, a military doctor in Sagal's adaptation and, finally, an elite military scientist in Lawrence's film. In spite of Lawrence's refreshing move of casting a non-white actor as Neville, Roberts' (2016) observations of a gradual transition of the main character "from anomaly to messiah" (42) is correct and leads the consecutive screen adaptations further and further away from the disruptive tone and unsettling plot of the original novel. As will be shown in the following sections, however, this trend is only valid for the officially released version of Lawrence's movie and is reversed in the director's cut that realigns the film with the critical and subversive narrative of Matheson's book.

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[3] It has been noted that Will Smith is the first black American to act as the last man on earth (see for instance Brayton 2011). Previous adaptations of Matheson's novel such as Ubaldo Ragona's *The Last Man on Earth* (2008 [1964]) and Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* (2003 [1971]) starred white actors—Vincent Price and Charlton Heston—in the lead role as Morgan and Neville respectively. Steve Niles and Elman Brown's graphic novel *I Am Legend* (2007 [1991]) follows the same convention and presents Neville as a white male—this in spite of the fact that Matheson's novel does not specifically mark Neville as white.

In the officially released version of *I Am Legend*, a logic of mutual exclusivity is predominant from the beginning and maintained throughout the entire narrative. The audience is systematically invited to align and ally with Neville alone. Devices such as close-ups on his face, flashback sequences, sad or valorising musical tunes, and monologues among other things make his feelings and considerations accessible to spectators and thus strongly invite allegiance and empathy with his character. In contrast, the vampires remain largely in the shadows, hidden in the dark or only briefly captured in quick cuts and quivering long-shots. Once they appear, they are narrowly framed as posing an immediate and deadly threat that has to be disposed of under the application of all means available, thus rendering implied legitimacy to the severely violent measures taken by the main protagonist. Negotiation, retreat, and even surrender are excluded as viable alternatives due to the completely inhumane nature of what is framed as an incomprehensibly aggressive, monstrous opponent.

When presented as object for Neville's scientific experiments, the vampires are reduced to the status of pacified, clinical exhibits. The scenes are set in a clean and neatly organised high-tech laboratory in the basement of Neville's stronghold. The other is depicted as tied to a stretcher and connected to various instruments monitoring its biological (mal)functions (see figure 1). The specimen do not have names, but are distinguished by the code for the experimental serum they are exposed to. Rather than constituting an alternative subjectivity the movie's hegemonic discourse frames the other as deadly threat and dangerous symptom of a terrible disease. Neville's activities in the laboratory are presented as the determined and well-organised endeavours of a professional scientist working for an unquestionably good cause. This cause and the clinical atmosphere of calm professionalism discourages possible sympathy with the suffering and dying other.

Figure 1. The other as scientific exhibit in the officially released version of *I Am Legend* (2007); screenshot taken by the author.

The officially released version of Lawrence's film maintains a form of de-humanisation and de-subjectification of an objectified and "unambiguously not human" (Hantke 2011: 170) enemy-other even at the cost of obvious narrative inconsistencies. For instance, the

177

film leaves the apparent development of the enemy's intellectual capacities and organisational skills throughout the narrative unexplained, and as such refrains from further inquiring into the sudden ability of the vampires to implement coordinated attacks, or to construct a sophisticated trap to capture Neville. As Bowring (2015) argues, this overall outlook is in line with the beginning of Matheson's novel where Neville "displays many classic attributes of the dominant self over a foreign other" (132), but decisively breaks with the book's ending that witnesses a re-humanisation of the opponents and entails a "complete reversal of position of self and other" (134).

After the death of his only companion, the German shepherd dog, a despairing Neville tries to commit suicide by openly attacking the vampires during night-time, but is rescued by Anna and Ethan, a woman and a boy exhibiting the same inexplicable immunity to the deadly virus as he does himself. As the two adults cautiously start to communicate, a fundamental disagreement emerges between them. While Neville puts his trust into science and almost manically works on developing a cure (to the human-created disease), the woman claims to be following the voice of God leading her to a colony of survivors. The character of Anna also opens an estranging gaze on the vampiric other that grows out of an apparently religiously motivated form of compassion and, thus, constitutes an alternative to the militarist logics and cold scientific calculations of Neville. How the film towards the end negotiates the opposing view-points and philosophical positions of Anna and Neville is key for the overall ideological outlook of the work and constitutes a crucial difference between the cinema version and the subsequent director's cut.

The end of *I Am Legend* (in its officially released version) depicts Neville, Anna, and Ethan trapped in the laboratory. Only a wall made of security glass—the classical trope of a protective topographical barrier coinciding with an epistemological one—divides them from the monstrous enemy's massive onslaught. Sequences of quivering mid-shots on the anonymous mass of aggressively attacking vampires are juxtaposed with close-ups on the slowly cracking protective barrier, and on the three human survivors. When the enemy is about to break through, Neville hands the cure—a serum he had just extracted from one of his objects of experimentation—to Anna, and hides her and the boy in a small safe room attached to the laboratory. During a last conversation, Neville says he is doing what he is doing because he "started listening". In the officially released version this implies that he was convinced by Anna and started to follow the voice of God supposedly speaking through her. In addition, he states that "they won't stop" reiterating once more the complete impossibility of any solution to the conflict except a total annihilation of either self or other. Then, Neville uses a grenade and heroically sacrifices his own life to stop the menacing advance of the vampires, obliterating the estranging potentials of Anna's emerging compassionate outlook on the other in the process.

The final sequence of the officially released version completes this moral dichotomisation of the narrative. The scenes show the woman and the boy arriving at an uninfected safe haven. A massive steel portal slowly opens and the camera catches a white wooden church, an American flag, and armed men in uniform—the classical insignia of US religious conservativism (see figure 2). As the woman and the boy enter the village, a voice-over recounts Neville's heroic deed stating that he became legend

because he successfully developed a cure and saved their lives while sacrificing his own.

Figure 2. Wall, church, flag, and soldier-self: Connoting safety in the officially released version of *I Am Legend* (2007); screenshot taken by the author.

As among others Bowring (2015) and Degouveia (2017) have pointed out, the ending of the cinematic release decisively breaks with the tone of Matheson's novel that explicitly disconnects the figure of the vampire from tropes of evil and precludes the emergence of a dichotomous moral universe. In the officially released version of Lawrence's movie, this critical perspective is reversed, as the ending completes the transition of the main protagonist from "anomaly to messiah" identified by Roberts (2016: 42). This move, again, invites a connection between the film and mainstream political narratives in the US that often rearticulate complex real-world struggles and contradictions through simplistic frames of epic battles between good and evil centred upon the violent male hero.

The icons of rural, religious conservativism and American patriotism deployed in the final sequence of the film to connote safety and a new start, the idea of following the implied will of God, and the way the coloured main protagonist sacrifices his life combating a completely dehumanised, aggressive enemy, all resonate with a religiously inspired populist rhetoric positing a predominantly US self against evil opponents threatening their lives and freedom without apparent reason. In particular these factors have led Hantke (2011) to categorise the film as "a key text of the final period of the Bush years" (166) that relocates the future to the Republican ideal of rural, small town America (168) and prompted Moreman (2012) to assert that Lawrence's film favoured "conservative Christian moralizing" rather than staying close to Matheson's original focus on "alternative spirituality" (130). In a similar manner, Heyes (2017) claims that the officially released version "recodes the vampiric dark-seekers as radical Islamic terrorists" (1), while Boyle (2009) describes the film as reiterating a "neoconservative combination of religious and market fundamentalism with an aggressive foreign policy" (1).

Some authors have directed attention to ambivalent and critical aspects of the officially released version. Hwang (2015), for instance, argues that Lawrence's film "draws a clear boundary between humans and the monsters", but at the same time finds that the film, in its officially released version, "reveals the instability of the border between us and them" (2). In a similar manner, Bowring (2015) makes the argument that the theatre-version of *I Am Legend* retains some critical potentials in that it frames Neville's death as due to his inability of understanding the humanness of the other (135–136). However, she also concedes that for instance Hantke's (2011) critical reading of the other in the film as "insect-like invasion" (135) has its merits. According to Brayton (2011), Will Smith's starring as a "black Christ" (69) somewhat alleviates the most accentuated messianic right-wing elements of the narrative, as such pointing to a common trade-off between identity issues on the one hand, and politics and economy on the other that was identified by Artz (2015) as typical for mainstream US culture.

As the remainders of the article will show, I agree with Hantke (2011), Moreman (2012), Boyle (2009), Žižek (2010), Heyes (2017), and others who have pointed to the conservative, militarist, and at times outright reactionary ideological subtext of the officially released version. In contrast to all the authors mentioned above, however, I put a critical reading of the hegemonic version of *I Am Legend* up against the significant subversive potentials for meaning invited by a director's cut that openly interrogates and directly challenges received generic Hollywood conventions thereby estranging received discursive frames of othering and exclusion.

In contrast to the officially released version, the director's cut of Lawrence's movie sticks far closer to the original narrative of the novel the film is based on. Accordingly, this 'unofficial' release not only provides answers to the unresolved questions concerning the sudden intellectual and organisational capabilities of the enemy, but in the end also fundamentally redistributes the roles of good and evil. This happens through the successful activation of the subversive potentials vested in the shared, 'liminal space' (Pötzsch 2010) of the laboratory during the final sequence of the film. As I will show below, this alternative ending counters the dominant tendency of meaning of the officially released version entirely and makes the film resonate strongly with an oppositional discourse critical of populist framings of complex and contradictory real-world struggles as simplistic wars against evil.

"Did All of Them Die?"—Recalibrating Self and Other in the Director's Cut of Lawrence's *I Am Legend* (2007)

The director's cut of Lawrence's *I Am Legend* fundamentally changes the film's narrative. By means of a new ending and a few changed scenes, this alternative version effectively punctuates the discursive logic of polarisation that remains constitutive of the official release. This is achieved on the liminal location of Neville's laboratory that has been transformed from a field of battle to a shared space enabling communication and peaceful exchange. Surprisingly, neither Heyes (2017), Moreman (2012), Boyle (2009), Hantke (2011), Žižek (2010), or Moya and López (2017) take this alternative version into account when criticising *I Am Legend*'s inherently conservative, reactionary, militarist, and religious ideological subtexts, and the film's incapability of addressing issues of third spaces, cultural hybridity, and peaceful coexistence. Degouveia (2017: 143) briefly acknowledges the existence of an alternative version of

the film, while Bowring (2015) mentions the director's cut in an endnote conceding that it "dwells much more on the encounter between Neville and the Dark Seeker" (142, note 6). Unfortunately, neither of them subjects this original version to any closer scrutiny.

The director's cut consciously plays with and gradually explains the various cues deployed throughout the film to tacitly imply a possible evolution of the vampiric other. When Neville for instance captures a 'female specimen' for his experiments, a male appears in the door and exposes himself to the light of the sun that is deadly for vampires before retreating with a scream. Neville is unable to interpret this behaviour as caused by possible care for the captured individual, but mechanically records this event as due to a complete breakdown of human capacities for reasoning, effectively reducing the enemy to the status of merely vegetative life. Later, the main protagonist is caught in a sophisticated trap that the enemy-other has put into place by copying the mechanism Neville himself uses to get hold of specimen for his experiments. The stunning fact that the vampires have developed the skills to construct such a device, and to ensnare its victim by distributing shop window dummies in the area, remains unacknowledged by the main character—and by the officially released version of the film.

Neville remains positioned by a hegemonic discourse of war that makes the other inconceivable as anything but a dehumanised deadly threat, or an objectified symptom of disease. In contrast to the officially released version, however, the director's cut makes this 'epistemological barrier' (Pötzsch 2010; Pötzsch 2013) that confines the other and effectively prevents its emergence as a conscious and living being, the overt theme of the subsequent narrative. As such, the film interrogates the very conventions of its own genre and, through a carefully devised storyline, subverts these eventually. After the arrival of the human survivors, Anna and Ethan, the barrier stabilising the hegemonic subject-position of the soldier-scientist, slowly starts to crack, and during a final showdown on the liminal grounds of the laboratory, it dissolves entirely.

One scene is crucial for the denaturalisation of Neville's hegemonic discursive position as a scientist and military man. As he shows Anna his laboratory, she catches sight of the female vampire Neville had newly caught. Anna approaches the other tied to a stretcher and a close-up on her face reveals that she watches the creature intensely, before asking: "Will that [the test serum] cure her?" Neville replies with a matter of fact voice that "[…] no, this will almost certainly kill it". When Anna turns away the camera follows her movement filming over her shoulder to indicate her point of view. It finally catches sight of hundreds of black and white photographs covering the entire back wall of the laboratory (see figure 3). All the images show the faces of vampires and are marked with various information written in tiny letters under each image. Anna stands paralysed for a few second before she asks: "Did all of them die?" Neville answers without looking up with a brief and simple "yes", whereupon Anna utters an exasperated "My God…".

Figure 3. "Did all of them die?"—Re-Humanising the objectified other in the director's cut of *I Am Legend* (2007); screenshot taken by the author.

This sequence clearly shows the degree of dehumanisation of the other characteristic of Neville's hegemonic subject position and has led Degouveia (2017) to speculate about a deliberate iconographic connection between a "genocidal magnitude" (145) of Neville's experiments and the activities taking place in the 'laboratories' of Nazi death camps. As will be explained later, this comparison is viable, but only in relation to the director's cut that, unfortunately, has been disregarded by Degouveia. In only focusing on the officially released version, the suggested analogy would make an implied Dr. Mengele the main hero of the narrative who, in the end, sacrifices himself to amend his sins and save mankind from his victims now re-framed as a deadly threat. This interpretation, of course, is deeply problematic and only attention to the director's cut can alleviate this aporic conclusion.

In both versions of *I Am Legend*, the character of Anna opens potential new perspectives on the confined other. Only in the director's cut, however, this alternative gaze comes to fruition enabling a fundamental challenge of received Hollywood tropes and the hegemonic discursive position of the main hero.

Anna's inclusive position emerges from her use of the personal pronouns 'he' or 'she' as opposed to Neville's 'it' when referring to the vampires. Such verbal re-articulations of the other as inherently human are visually supported by a different gaze that enables an individualisation of the enemy, and that does not only challenge Neville's hegemonic point of view, but also brings the discursive frames constituting both self and other to the sudden awareness of the audience.

Neville, however, remains insensitive to this potential repositioning. He is unable to accept Anna's articulation for what it really is; a re-framing of the enemy-other as a fellow human being. Therefore, Neville snaps back into his scientific mindset by targeting the element of religion in Anna's speech, effectively circumventing an engagement with the subversive potentials emanating from her compassionate inclusion of the other. Neville simply states that "God didn't do this, Anna. We did", implying a repetition of his mantra 'I can still fix this', thus reiterating the received Hollywood trope of the individual male hero saving the day. The director's cut, however,

fundamentally subverts this position in the end precisely by re-articulating and including the previously confined other on the liminal space of the laboratory.

In the following night, Neville's stronghold is attacked by a ravaging mass of extremely aggressive vampires. During the struggle, Neville, Anna, and Ethan are forced to retreat into the laboratory. In the end, only the transparent security glass of the quarantine section where also the female specimen Neville had captured earlier is located, protects them from the onslaught of their enemies. While the officially released version defuses this potential liminal situation by annihilating both Neville and all his opponents in the blast of an explosive device triggered by the main protagonist to save Anna and Ethan, the director's cut presents a surprising turn of events.

The subsequent scenes witness a subtle change in focalisation towards balancing the perspectives of Neville and his main adversary. A series of shot/reverse shot sequences alternate between the point of view of Neville who wields a pistol and exclaims that he can save everybody because his serum works, and the vantage point of the vampires' leader reacting with apparent outrage repeatedly throwing himself against the security glass that slowly starts to crack. Then, a series of close-ups shows the two opponents facing one another, before the vampire suddenly smears what appears to be a butterfly on the glass wall and retreats (see figure 4a). Neville's face, filmed in a close-up, reveals his dawning understanding as he slowly turns around the body of the female he had been experimenting with and reveals the tattoo of a butterfly on her shoulder. The shock this sudden discovery of the enemy-other's humanity and subjectivity entails is clearly reflected on the main protagonist's face that turns ash-grey. The transparent barrier formerly protecting the self against an apparently inhumane other has suddenly been transformed into a medium of communication and non-violent exchange.

Neville slowly puts the gun down, carefully removes the tabs and tubes that insert the serum into the woman's body and tells Anna to open the door. When she asks what he is doing, Neville answers: "I start listening". In this case, however, this does not imply that Neville starts to listen to the voice of God implying a successful repositioning within a hegemonic religious discourse, but that he now engages in a first-to-second person dialogue with the enemy. *Neville has started listening to the previously confined voice of the other.* This evolving communication with the vampires is enabled on the shared liminal location of the laboratory that had been blown to pieces—and thereby deprived of its subversive potentials—in the officially released version of the film.

Neville then leaves the quarantine section with the female vampire lying on a stretcher. Dwelling close-ups and mid-shots on the two vampires now reunited are supported by low music. Their gestures reveal mutual affection, care, and love, and strongly invite audience empathy with their evolving characters. The male vampire then carries the woman outside leaving Neville, Anna, and Ethan behind without harming them. A last eyeline match that indicates Neville's perspective focuses once again on the hundreds of black and white photographs covering the laboratory wall (see figures 4b–4c). This time, Neville (and the audience with him) perceive the depicted specimen as individuals, and indeed his victims, effectively indicating Neville's adoption of a different gaze, and the successful dislodging of the hegemonic identity of the soldier-scientist.

Figures 4a–4c. Dislodging mutually exclusive identities of war: liminal grounds in the director's cut of *I Am Legend* (2007); screenshots taken by the author.

Throughout the sequences in the laboratory, the enemy-other has been re-humanised and re-subjectified. The other emerges not only as an alternative discursive identity, but, in contrast to Matheson's novel, also as a morally and ethically superior agent who

refrains from avenging the terrible sufferings Neville had been subjecting their species to during his experiments. At this point, Degouveia's (2017) observations regarding the Neville–Mengele analogy become relevant and can be sustained throughout the remaining narrative that refrains from absolving Neville of his sins and denies him the honours of heroic self-sacrifice.

The iconography of the laboratory with the meticulously recorded mass murder committed for a presumably good cause against victims that had been discursively reduced to mere vegetative life, indeed uncannily reminds the viewer of imageries connected to Nazi death camps during World War II. This choice of style draws a chain of equivalence between the narrative's main protagonist with whom the audience is aligned and allied, and the 'physicians' experimenting in the camps. By these means, the film underlines the extreme consequences of discursive constructions of the other as less than human and issues a damning critique of the dominant ideology of generic Hollywood war and action cinema as inviting precisely such forms and practices of de-humanisation.

In the last scene of the film, the breaking up of formerly sedimented hegemonic subject-positions is visually emphasised through the spatial movement of the main protagonists who leave the (crushed) topographical barriers of Neville's home behind and head into an unascertained beyond. The movement of their car across a bridge into the unknown illustrates a dislodging of Neville's and Anna's discursive identities. In the end, both military-scientific and religious, hegemonic frames are unsettled through a "performative encounter" (Rosello 2005: 1) with the allegedly evil and deadly dangerous other that enables new, nonviolent subject positions, inclusion, and mutual understanding. The contrast to the officially released version that reinstitutes an inherently patriotic and religious discourse as a hegemonic diegetic frame that necessitates the total annihilation of the other could hardly be more striking.

This closure brings the director's cut into close proximity to the narrative in Matheson's 1954 novel that, according to Faizi (2015), is a study about the terrible consequences of "dialogue annihilation" (40). In the novel, the main protagonist's final exclamation "I am legend" (160) serves to indicate his sudden realisation that while having lived in the profound belief of having fought evil, in reality he himself had acted like the legendary monster killing infected yet still human beings in their sleep: "he [Neville] was anathema and black terror to be destroyed" (Matheson 1954: 160).[4] Published in the US at the height of McCarthyan cold war paranoia, it can be argued that Matheson's novel represents a comment on the predominant hegemonic discourse of its time that is comparable to the way Lawrence's director's cut reframes the global war on terror and its various strategies of populist othering and exclusion.

Such connections to political discourse are in line with much of the criticism levelled against the theatre version of Lawrence's film. Walliss and Aston (2011), for instance, state that "[t]he decision to release a more straightforward, unambiguous version [of *I Am Legend*] that resituated Manichean concepts of good and evil, represents the contestation and difficulty in addressing such themes in a post-9/11 world where socio-political turbulence, military conflict and the War on Terror engendered a divisive terrain of meaning and representation" (62). Arguing in a related direction, Bowring (2015) comments that "[i]t is notable that the post 9/11 adaptation [of Matheson's *I Am*

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[4] For a thoughtful comparison of novel and film versions, see for instance Bowring (2015).

Legend] is the adaptation which refuses the most forcibly to shift perspective in the way Matheson's novel did […] which indicates much about contemporary perspectives and accounts of selfhood and alterity" (135). In a similar manner, Žižek (2010) laments the loss of the original narrative's "authentically multicultural experience" (63) in that the "hero's death reasserts [...] his lost community" (64) rather than fundamentally questioning received perceptions of the other. According to Žižek, this makes Lawrence's *I Am Legend* indicative of a reactionary turn in US politics and culture after 9/11. It is surprising that none of the above-mentioned authors takes the director's cut of Lawrence's movie into consideration, or addresses the timely question of why the accomplished and thoughtful narrative of the original film had been transformed into shallow and unconvincing mainstream entertainment prior to its cinematic release.

Profit-Orientation Turned into Artistic Form—*I Am Legend* and the Political Economy of Art and Entertainment

In his handbook for movie productions, Marich (2013) presents a series of strategies and tactics that can be used to ensure the economic viability and success of film projects. Detailing among other things established best practices for poster design and placement, the use of trailers, pre-screenings, tracking surveys and end surveys, as well as single- and transmedia marketing, he shows what producers and directors can, and according to him indeed should, do to make their products economically sustainable and profitable.

In his endeavour, Marich (2013) constantly subsumes aesthetic and political considerations under the allegedly overarching logic and requirements of an economic marketplace were cultural products' main function is to vie for the attention of mainstream audiences with the main purpose of achieving economic gains. As such, the strategies and tactics he presents are apparently located above politics as they, in an allegedly neutral fashion, describe the very means necessary to survive the severe competition characteristic of the cultural sector. However, as among others Artz (2015) or Alford (2015) have shown, the decision to simply accept the peculiar tastes and preferences of mainstream audiences and various subsegments of this category as the only viable measure of success is a problematic move that disregards the inherently political and power-laden character of hegemonic positions and outlooks. Established frames and predominant tastes are reified—treated as a natural state of affairs that then pre-structures and predisposes the further production process. By these means, content and form of mainstream cultural products are systematically pushed to neglect non-normative audiences and to reinforce already dominant positions.

The tale-of-two-versions recounted above reflects the operation of such a hegemonic apparatus of production. According to among others Lambie (2011) and Lunte (2015), the changes made to Lawrence's movie prior to its official release were the result of pre-screenings of the completed film with test audiences who had rejected the original narrative and demanded a more morally straightforward and up-beat ending to the story. In an interview he recently gave to *Screen Rant* (Cotter 2018), the director himself conceded that economic constraints made him refrain from his original wish to do "the story of the novella [*I Am Legend*] straight up" (n. p.). In continuation, Lawrence asserts the superior quality of the original ending and explains the subsequent changes with conventional genre expectations of targeted audiences:

> I agree it's [the director's cut is] the better ending. I mean, it's the more philosophical version of the end, but in terms of story math we're doing everything you're not supposed to do, right? The hero doesn't find the cure, right? They drive off into the unknown and the creatures you've been saying are the bad ones the whole time you learn actually have humanity and aren't the bad ones—the hero's the bad one. And so you've basically turned everything on its head. We tested it twice and it got wildly rejected, wildly rejected, which is why we came out with the other one (in Cotter 2018).

This makes apparent that expected box-office numbers undermined the critical outlook of the original work and instead led to a film that reiterates, even at the cost of significant narrative inconsistencies, a received Hollywood story template centred upon a Manichean struggle between good and evil.

Through the case of *I Am Legend*, the pre-screening of movies with hegemonic test-audiences becomes conceivable as a key mechanism of a Hollywood propaganda model in the sense of Alford (2011; 2015). Through this technique, Herman and Chomsky's (2002 [1988]) first filter—ownership and profit orientation—becomes operational and successfully plays into the fourth and fifth one—an avoidance of possible flak and the invocation of a generic anti-*ism. As the readings of the two versions conducted above suggest, in adapting aesthetic form to genre conventions and assumed mainstream tastes, Lawrence not only ensured economic success of his title, but in the process also recalibrated *I Am Legend*'s overall ideological outlook aligning it to hegemonic discursive and cultural frames centred upon perpetuated struggles against allegedly inhumane and disposable, *ungrievable* (Butler 2009) others.

In contrast to the released version, the director's cut of *I Am Legend* profoundly challenges such a reified hegemonic world view prevalent in the contemporary US. In its original form, the film re-ambiguates an apparently dichotomous and mutually exclusive moral universe and relentlessly exposes the brutality and inhumanity underlying received generic conventions and dominant discursive frames of war. With its new ending, the film lost most of its challenging and troubling aspects, thus becoming politically docile as well as digestible and sellable to key audiences. This shows that economically motivated changes and alterations of cultural expressions are never unpolitical, but imply an often unintended and implicit, but nevertheless powerful, reification and reproduction of a received hegemonic status quo.

Conclusion

Making movies is an expensive business promising significant revenues, but also holding considerable potentials for economic failures and financial loss. In a market-oriented cultural sector predominantly oriented towards returns of investment, aesthetic, political, societal, and other considerations regularly loose out to allegedly natural market logics that streamline cultural expression with the objective to tailor them to the specific tastes and preferences of hegemonic audiences.

Through a comparative reading and subsequent contextualisation of the officially released version and the director's cut of Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend*, this article has shown that such practices of adaptation to assumed mainstream tastes are never innocent or located above the messy realms of politics. On the contrary, as the present

tale about a shift in emphasis has illustrated, allegedly neutral, economically motivated changes to manuscripts and whole films not only increase a particular work's range of address, but also imply an, often-tacit, realignment to received power structures and hegemonic frames for practice and understanding.

In highlighting this connection, I intended to contribute to a better understanding of the inherent connection between media content and messages on the one hand, and the political economy of their production and distribution on the other. After all, when profit-orientation turns into aesthetic form, this form will hardly invite for the dismantling or subversion of the very structures and frames predisposing its emergence in the first place. As among others' Stuart Hall's (1977) seminal work has shown, critical media scholarship needs to take the connections and mutual interferences between the realms of meaning and material production into account to be able to adequately describe, and intervene in, the politics of contemporary popular culture.

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