



## An Undead Film: The Afterlives of *L'ultimo Uomo Della Terra*

Marcus K. Harmes

To cite this article: Marcus K. Harmes (2020) An Undead Film: The Afterlives of *L'ultimo Uomo Della Terra*, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 37:5, 484-499, DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2019.1669423

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2019.1669423>



Published online: 09 Oct 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 32



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## An Undead Film: The Afterlives of *L'ultimo Uomo Della Terra*

Marcus K. Harmes

### Introduction

Richard Matheson's 1954 novel, *I am Legend*, has provided inspiration for three films, Sidney Salkow's *L'ultimo uomo della Terra/The Last Man on Earth* (1964) starring Vincent Price, Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* (1971) starring Charlton Heston and Rosalind Cash, and Francis Lawrence's *I am Legend* (2007) starring Will Smith (the direct to DVD *I am Omega* is not considered here). Although the novel has been a source for adaptation three times, the 1964 version is significant in its own right as a product of transnational film making, with an American star, Italian and American codirectors, U.S. setting created with Roman locations and its subsequent influence over both American and Italian horror films. The theory of adaptation most cogently and comprehensively outlined by Linda Hutcheon suggests ways to examine both continuity and discontinuity between this book and three films.

Each film is, borrowing Hutcheon's term, a "palimpsestuous" work that is "haunted at all times" by the source;<sup>1</sup> but which source? The 1964 film is a solid effort to be faithful, whereas *The Omega Man* makes only the smallest reference to the prior text (the title of the book is not even mentioned in the credits), yet finds important strands of adaptive potential from specific aspects of the text. Despite using the book's actual title, the 2007 film follows 1971's film for major plot points. There is accordingly a series of relationships between prior texts and progeny, but the links are complex. For any viewer unfamiliar with the source novel, each adaptation could have been a new experience in terms of the film's direction and creative decisions. But each successive film is also an adaptation of earlier films.<sup>2</sup> By the time the 2007 film was made, it was remaking not only the novel but earlier film iterations, in a process of what Hunter calls the triangulation between a film, a source novel, and earlier adaptations as well.<sup>3</sup>

---

Marcus K. Harmes is an Associate Professor at the University of Southern Queensland, who researches in higher education and cultural studies, with a particular emphasis on British religious history and popular culture. His most recent publications in the field of television studies include *Roger Delgado: I am Usually Referred to as the Master* (Fantom Publishing, 2017) and *Doctor Who and the Art of Adaptation* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). In 2018 he coedited the Springer Handbook on *Postgraduate Education in Higher Education*.

This complexity in relationships shows itself first in the 1964 film. Its screenplay was written by Matheson adapting his own novel, but Matheson hid his contribution under the pseudonym Logan Swanston. The movie was codirected, but only one of the directors is credited on screen. The film was made in Rome, but is set in America, and some of the Italian cast acted under anglicized pseudonyms. These peculiarities of writing and production (especially the writer taking his name off the film) suggest a troubled production. Likewise, the afterlife and reception of the *Last Man* has been controversial. Some critics thought it was too faithful to the book, but Matheson thought it was not faithful enough. Nor was it ever meant to be an Italian-U.S. co-production, but was to be made in England by Hammer Film Productions. Out of this confusion and dissatisfaction, what ended up on screen is a black-and-white science-fiction/horror crossover, filmed on location and in studio in Rome and one that treats the subject matter seriously. Although *L'ultimo uomo della Terra* only attracted a modest box office, this article positions it as the result of specific production decisions relating to casting, locations, design and story and as a cinematic presence which has never quite gone away.

Here, two questions are pursued. First, where did the 1964 film come from, in terms of influence from a source novel but also a foreign (from the U.S. point of view) horror cinema? Second, is: where did the film go, in terms of influence, not simply in terms of the two later adaptations, but also other major American and Italian horror films? To explain further, I place the scripting and visual realization of *Last Man* at the center of a complex interplay of different national cinemas, and where much of the visual style and content of the film was imported from English and American cinema, and the narrative from an American novel. The vampires come from Matheson's novel, where he explicitly says the undead *are* vampires. Matheson's literary creatures were described evocatively: 'the dead walk about' in a world that witnesses "the return of corpses."<sup>4</sup> But the film gave back to later adaptations as well and its adaptive potential went two ways: into direct remakes in 1971 and 2007, but also into Italian zombie films.

To take from Hutcheon's thought, an adaptation can be derivative while also being creative and autonomous.<sup>5</sup> The monstrous figures on screen in the 1964 film had a notable cinematic afterlife under a different name. Similar looking ghouls appeared four years later in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Even the most cursory look at the visual realization of Romero's monsters in that film, with their dark, racoon-like eyes and everyday dress, also shows that Romero and his makeup and costume team mimicked the design of the creatures in *Last Man*. The behavior of the creatures and their situation also transmits from 1964 to 1968. While a

vampire is typically an isolated figure, in both *Last Man* and Romero's film the creatures move en masse as a large-scale threat to a small number of survivors. Although they may have been called vampires, the creatures in *Last Man* looked like what zombies were shortly to become in costume and production design in cinema and they behaved in a way cinema viewers now retrospectively think of as zombie-like. These zombies modulate from the vampires of the American book, into an Italian film, but give the image and behavior to American cinema in Romero's film.

In time the zombies in all but name from *Last Man* returned to Italy, being reappropriated by Lucio Fulci and other Italian horror directors. But *Last Man* marks an important point of origin for the cinematic zombie and the film's status as a transnational product is part of the journey the zombie took to America and then back to Italy. This article is by no means the first to consider the way *Last Man* influenced later American cinema and the correlation between *Last Man* and later films such as *Night of the Living Dead* has been pointed out by reviewers, scholars and not least Romero himself, however it does give sustained attention to the adaptive interaction between book and films and suggests insights about the *Last Man's* transnational creation and influence that have previously been noted but not explored in depth.

### The Film in Context

The first question posed here was where did the film come from? The 1964 film was scripted by Matheson, starred the American horror actor Price and was codirected by an American, Sidney Salkow, but the other side of this film is Italian with the participation of Italian codirector Ubaldo Ragona. Besides the novel itself, the film is a result of triangulation of different influences. One is Hammer Film Productions, the small but prolific studio which wanted to adapt Matheson's novel but found the British censors would not pass the script for "Night Creatures." Another influence is American International Pictures (AIP), an outfit as prolific as Hammer. Whereas Hammer had Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee as its stars, AIP's star was Vincent Price, who by 1964 had made a series of camp and colorful horrors directed for the studio by Roger Corman with some written by Matheson.<sup>6</sup> The third element of the triangulation is Italy's own nascent horror filmmaking. Hammer and AIP both made gaudy horrors, set in Europe's medieval or pre-Industrial past, and many Italian horrors followed suit. But *Last Man* is grimly contemporary and monochrome and stands apart in tone and themes from much of its contemporary horror production in Italy, England and the United States. It is based on an American

novel, stars an American actor and was half-directed by an American, but it is also ineluctably a product of the 1960s Italian horror boom.

In this sense it came from the production of Italian or “spaghetti” horrors that was in full swing, but almost always with transnational input. In 1960 Mario Bava had directed the British actor Barbara Steele in *Black Sunday/La maschera del demonio* and Steele kept coming back to Italy for more, starring in Riccardo Freda’s *The Horrible Dr. Hichcock/L’Orribile Segreto del Dr. Hichcock* in 1962 and playing dual roles in Mario Caiano’s *Nightmare Castle/Amanti d’Oltretomba* in 1965, among others.<sup>7</sup> But Italian horror directors put Steele in historic settings such as Renaissance palaces and nineteenth-century catacombs. *Last Man* plays out in modern suburbia. In this regard it is staying faithful to the setting of the novel, which is set in and around the suburban house of the protagonist Robert Neville in Cimarron Street in regional America.<sup>8</sup>

The American lobby cards for the film promised something less prosaic and indicated the film would feature a creepy gothic mansion (rather like the Addams’ family home), but the illustrated dwelling does not actually appear as part of the film’s *mise en scène*. Perhaps American cinema patrons expected old dark houses after seeing Price in Corman’s AIP period horrors based on Edgar Allen Poe but they will have been disappointed. Price gives an atypically sombre performance. By 1964 he had been in fare such as Roger Corman’s *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Raven*, and the year after *Last Man* his on-screen excesses reached an apotheosis when he played the titular mad scientist in AIP’s 1965 film *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* (Norman Taurog). But in *Last Man*, Price extends his range, venturing in to the more serious branch of his performing that he only occasionally displayed, doing so again in 1968s *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves).<sup>9</sup> Any member of the audience in 1964 with extradiegetic knowledge of Price’s fun but scary persona may have been surprised by the way he plays it straight for Salkow and Ragona, portraying the moodiness, existential despair and alcoholism of the last man on earth.

Price’s serious performance is one of the unexpected aspects of this film and in general the production of *Last Man* leaves behind a number of puzzles. One of them is the process of codirection. Salkow and Ragona have not left any record of how they set about codirecting the film. Price and Salkow had worked together on another horror, *Twice Told Tales* (1963). Towards the end of his career as a director Salkow moved away from the westerns and wartime dramas that had defined his B-movie oeuvre and became something of a short-lived specialist in horror, or productions with horror trappings, directing *Twice Told Tales* and *Last Man*, then moving on to direct the gothic comedy *The Addams Family* on television.<sup>10</sup> By

contrast Ragona's experience was limited to only a handful of nonhorror films and documentaries. However it was that Ragona and Salkow divided up the responsibilities, the significance of their codirection is that it is one entry for the different adaptive influences from AIP and native Italian horror to have been fused.

### **Adapting Matheson: The Source Text**

Another puzzle is how to set about adapting a novel which, for most of its length, is focused on just one man interacting with no other people. There is a lot of written description in Matheson's book, but little dialogue, with priority given to what Clasen refers to as Neville's "strong internal focalization."<sup>11</sup> There are some strong action sequences (including an after-dark attack on Neville by the vampires and the final assault on Neville's house by the members of the new society, both of which are in the 1964 film) but overall it is a textually dense story. Matheson has lamented that his book has never been faithfully adapted and insists it still would make an interesting film but it is not clear how a book with almost no talk, very few supporting characters, and little action could be adapted "faithfully" to the screen. The 1964 film adapted the book by giving Price a great deal of voice-over monologue to read out. The screenplay for *Omega Man* compromised by giving Neville a bust of Julius Caesar to talk to, rather than talk to him. In the 2007 film, Will Smith's Neville has a dog to talk to for much of the length of the film.

### **Contrasts: Story and Setting**

As a second question, I asked where did the 1964 film go, in terms of its later cinematic influence? In thinking of the film as a result of adaptation, it is useful at this point to put it alongside the two which have followed in its wake. Both of them are credited as adaptations of Matheson's book, but is it more accurate to say they adapt from the 1964 film, or from other sources altogether? To answer the question, a number of contrasts need consideration. The core elements of Matheson's novel transmit across the 1964, 1971 and 2007 iterations: a devastating illness has destroyed human society and left behind one normal man and a horde of dangerous former humans. Neville (or Morgan in the 1964 film) lives an isolated existence. During the day (because the creatures are photosensitive) he stalks the city killing the dormant creatures. At night he fends off attacks on his house.

Despite these core features there is diversity between the three adaptations and between each film and the source novel. Yet, there is also, as Hunter<sup>12</sup> points out, an enriching yet complicating relationship between them. They each have a vision of a postapocalyptic world that grew more

visually impressive with each remake. The largely studio-bound version of 1964 gave way to Boris Sagal's filmed scenes of empty streets in Los Angeles. By 2007 CGI allowed for scenes of central Manhattan with the Brooklyn Bridge destroyed, streets overgrown with grass and deer and lions running amok. But at the core of each is the original sense of Matheson's novel of a dead and isolating world.

Sometimes this relationship between the book and the films is spotted in small details. In the 2007 film Neville frequents a video store he has filled with mannequins, a point that visually quotes from a key scene in *The Omega Man* when Neville discovers another normal human, Lisa, hiding among the mannequins in a department store. Moving from small details to the overall narrative, Matheson's insistence that Neville's indiscriminate hunting and staking has blurred the boundaries between the vampires and him is an idea in the films. Ruth explains in both the book and the 1964 film that Neville/Morgan is as much to be feared as the vampires, and in the 1964 version, Ruth tells him "You're a legend in the city." In *The Omega Man* a small boy tells Neville "you scare me more" than the creatures, a line of dialogue not in the novel but which is an echo of Ruth's fear of Neville. A further similarity is that all of the films repeat or modify the extensive scientific speculation from Matheson's novel. In the 2007 film Dr. Krippin has created a cure for cancer that mutates into a destructive virus, whereas in 1971 biological war between Russia and China unleashed the killer, and in 1964 there are suggestions about nuclear dust storms carrying a bacillus.

One feature common to all three films, but which has its point of origin in the first adaptation, is the creative decision to abandon Matheson's character of Neville as a plant worker who is also an autodidact in viral medicine and to make the lead character a scientist (Matheson 27). Morgan and the Nevilles of 1971 and 2007 are scientists. Indeed in 2007 he is known to a human survivor as "The Robert Neville," suggesting a degree of fame because of his scientific research and in *Omega Man* his scientific articles are well known to a young medical student. All three adaptations have not only made Neville a scientist, but also maintain him as a more heroic figure, removed the seedier aspects of the novel. Vincent Price's performance complicates that point. Critics generally acknowledge that his performance eschewed campier excesses but as Denis Meikle (2006, 34) characterizes him in the film, he is "limp wristed," whereas both Charlton Heston and Will Smith are more forthrightly masculine. The production date of *The Omega Man* positions it against a complicated social and political backdrop. The film is noted for its positive depiction of African American characters and multiracial romance, but also as a signifier of cultural anxieties about the Vietnam War.<sup>13</sup>

Against that, Neville stands as a conservative figure, mocking the optimism he sees when watching the Woodstock documentary. None, however, match the “working class, ex-military, hairy-chested Everyman” in the novel.<sup>14</sup> In the book, Neville conducts experiments on infected women, and Matheson makes clear the contiguity between these experiments by the very sexually frustrated Neville and a sexual assault; Neville even has to remind himself that he is not going to rape anyone. In prose, Matheson lingers over the detail, such as when Neville “injected allyl sulfide into her soft fleshy buttock.”<sup>15</sup> In 1964 there were no scenes of experiments, yet in 1971 Neville experiments on a robust male specimen. In 2007 Neville captures a female “darkseeker” but the scenes lack the disturbing sexual overtones of the novel.

Although Matheson ultimately was disenchanted with the 1964 film and the script (hence using a pseudonym), that version is the most faithful of the three to the book. Visually, it is a fair effort (despite the Italian locations) to realize on screen the suburban milieu of Neville/Morgan’s fight for survival. Key elements of the novel are in *Last Man*. Above all it recreates in filmic terms the novel’s impression that Neville lives in “a supernatural world.”<sup>16</sup> We see a world of lumbering dead creatures, piles of burning corpses, sinister figures in gas masks and above all an eerie emptiness. As part of this world the vampirized friend Ben Cortman and Matheson’s carefully formulated scientific theories about the vampire bacillus recur from book to film.<sup>17</sup> In the book and the 1964 film Neville/Morgan attempts to befriend a dog, which succumbs to the virus (83–100). After a long period of isolation he spots a seemingly uninfected young woman, whom he contacts and learns is called Ruth (111–144). However, Ruth is not all she seems; she is infected but can control the infection. She does not come from the ranks of the undead that cluster outside Neville’s house trying to attack him. Instead she is part of a postapocalyptic society that is rebuilding after the disaster, but who recognize their genetic difference from the mutants *and* from Neville/Morgan. By the end of the book and the 1964 film they have killed Neville.

Later adaptations, therefore, took ideas from the 1964 adaptation but also did not pursue the three-way interactions between Neville, the vampires and the new society common to the book and the Vincent Price film. In *Omega Man*, Neville encounters a group of humans, who retain an uninfected humanity identical to his and are uncomplicated allies, as they are in the 2007 film. In this regard, much of the point of Matheson’s book was lost. The title *I am Legend* also comprises the last three words of the novel. They show Neville’s understanding that the world he represented, as well as his biological state, will both pass into legend with his demise. Neville has thought of himself as “normal” and his actions in slaying the

creatures as appropriate, but at the last realizes the mutated people of the new society think of him as a threat and a monster, who will be remembered as such.

No such ontological sophistication defines the narratives of *Omega Man* or the 2007 film, which both position Neville in an uncomplicated situation as the “normal” against the abnormal, and both end with the hope that normal humanity will rise again; in both there is a small colony of human survivors rather than a wholly new civilization. Rather than adapting from the novel or the 1964 film, both are in line with what<sup>18</sup> refers to as the “recurring structural elements” of the zombie apocalypse, where there are survivors who will emerge on the other side of the catastrophe. But the 1964 film stays faithful to Matheson’s delineation of the terminal point of the human race.

In 1971 Boris Sagal directed Charlton Heston as Neville in *The Omega Man*. Again Matheson disliked it. Although the essential plot of the “last man” surrounded by menace is translated from the novel, the source text is barely acknowledged on screen and the opening credits only say it was “adapted from a novel by Richard Matheson,” not even giving the title. As an adaptation, the script by John and Joyce Carrington is actually more like a loose distillation of two throwaway ideas from the novel and then the portrayal of the monsters in *Last Man*. One throwaway idea from the novel is the setting. In the novel and the 1964 adaptation the setting is dreary suburbia. Neville has fortified his house, running a generator in his garage, driving about in a station wagon, stocking up on frozen food, and staking the undead in nearby houses. The question arises why someone would try to sit out the apocalypse in the suburbs. Even Matheson seemed to realize this point, going to great pains to explain away why the vampires stalking outside the house have not just set it on fire, suggesting that their vampirism has impaired their cognitive function. The excuse does not really convince and throughout the book and 1964 Neville seems strangely accessible to the mutants just outside the kitchen door.

But briefly in the novel, Neville considers moving away from his home into a plush hotel somewhere in the city.<sup>19</sup> He never does, staying put in his little house. But the single sentence in the novel seems to have been enough to reconfigure Neville’s domestic circumstances in *The Omega Man*. There Neville lives loftily in a large, multistoried townhouse (as does Neville in the 2007 film), with a barricaded basement garage, strong search lights and a high balcony from which he can shoot the mutants at his leisure. Most of the novel’s setting and drama was jettisoned. In the film Neville uses guns, not stakes, and the antagonists are smart enough to try to set Neville’s house of fire. Neville uses an elaborate security system of CCTV and electric gates to keep the “Family,” as the creatures call

themselves, at bay. Neville takes his love of luxury yet further. He has raided art galleries for pictures to hang on his walls and by day he prowls around car dealerships and posh hotels, also stealing clothing from up market department stores. Partway through the film Charlton Heston appears dressed in a velvet smoking jacket and frilly lace shirt, not looking remotely like the shabby Neville clad in denim that Matheson described in the novel.<sup>20</sup>

In fact Neville's domestic arrangements in *The Omega Man* do not so much adapt from Matheson but seem to take their cue from another major science fiction writer, John Wyndham. Wyndham's novel *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), like Matheson's, depicts a world depopulated by a global catastrophe and where a man fights for survival against a number of perils. On the basis of this book, Wyndham has been derided for creating the "cozy catastrophe" genre of science fiction writing.<sup>21</sup> The cozy catastrophe is a middle class apocalypse, where the survivor of the catastrophe raids department stores, lives in swanky apartments (as the original owners are dead) and generally makes the most out of the disaster in terms of free access to good housing, fast cars, clothing, and fine wine.

Tellingly in *Omega Man* when Neville is captured by the mutants, he is in a wine cellar. The *mise-en-scène* of *Omega Man* is large hotels and grand public buildings in uptown Los Angeles, far removed from Matheson's original suburbia. Neville in *Omega Man* has a considerably more pleasant time of it than the character in the book or the 1964 film. In the book Neville slouches around drunk and miserable, full of pent-up sexual urges.<sup>22</sup> Price's characterization stresses the distraught and shabby aspects alluded to in the novel and appears on screen in an old tweed jacket and dragging on cigarettes. Heston, however, brings to life a character who enjoys dressing up, goes to the movies, blows the creatures away with machine guns and, unlike in the book and 1964 film, gets to sleep with the female lead.

*Omega Man* is also clearly updated to reflect social preoccupations of its time, not the 1950s. Neville watches *Woodstock*, and the much-discussed multiracial kiss between Charlton Heston and Rosalind Cash's character (as well as the wisecracks about the young Black woman hustling clothes and coming from Harlem) are products of its early 1970s' context.<sup>23</sup> On that note, such is Neville's standard of living in *Omega Man* that one of the mutants refers in disgust to the "honky paradise" up in the townhouse (Neville himself calls it the "penthouse suite"), and at the climax the creatures relish destroying the décor and laboratory equipment in Neville's house. Until then, however, it had been both a congenial home as well as a convincingly fortified base of operations (Sample 32).<sup>24</sup>

A second brief and undeveloped interlude in Matheson's novel is a flashback to when the plague was starting to kill millions of people and society was collapsing, and Neville accidentally walked into a religious revivalist meeting when a preacher is imploring a hysterical congregation to repent while ascribing the plague to God's punishment.<sup>25</sup> The scene is a brief one but again seems to be something that informed the later visual style of *The Omega Man*. In the novel and 1964 film, the vampires are as prosaic as Neville's domestic circumstances.

One of them is repeatedly referred to as fat and almost comical in its resemblance to Oliver Hardy, the film comedian. They wear ordinary apparel such as dresses and housecoats.<sup>26</sup> That look is the one in *Night of the Living Dead* and its sequels, where the zombies wear in everyday dress. But Sagal turned his creatures in *The Omega Man* into a religious nightmare. The "Family" are clad in dark religious robes. They were gathered together by a former newscaster Jonathan Matthias, now called just Matthias, who walked the streets ringing a bell and calling the mutants to follow him. The robes and the bell give a strongly religious flavor to this Family, as an echo of the religious hysteria Neville briefly witnesses in the novel. In place of the mindlessness of the creatures in the book and the 1964 film, the "Family" have a fully developed religious doctrine, and decry the technological past as an age of heresies and go out of their way to destroy libraries, museums, and art galleries. They even organize an auto de fé to condemn Neville as the "lord of the internal machine," dress him in a white hat, tie him to a stake, and set it on fire.

### Later Contrasts: The Antagonists

The horrific appearance of the Family members returns our attention to the question of zombies as one of the sites of adaptive potential between the book and its films. In Matheson's novel it is clearly explained that the creatures are vampires. They suck blood and are staked through the heart.<sup>27</sup> At one point Neville is even reading Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to get ideas on how to deal with them (17). However, while Matheson describes at length scientific theories about how a bacteria infected humans and turned them into vampires, the creatures' ontological status is actually imprecise, or rather later cinema has made it imprecise. However, the imprecision starts with the book. Throughout the book Matheson refers to them as the living dead and describes them burrowing out of their graves, thus using terminology and imagery that now brings to mind as much zombies as vampires. They are creatures where "need was their only motivation."<sup>28</sup>

In the 1964 film there is a sequence where they pursue Morgan through a dark graveyard, a scene that brings to mind the opening sequences of *Night of the Living Dead*. They are also slow, lumbering, and stupid (hence not burning down Neville's house) and their brain function is almost extinct. Neither the Family members of *Omega Man* nor the darkseekers led by the Alpha Male of the 2007 film follow in a trajectory from the ghouls in 1964. Each have a distinctive appearance, although the dark robed albinos of *Omega Man* clearly influenced the albino creatures who menace Neville in the 2007 version.

But in 1954 when Matheson wrote the novel and 1964 when Salkow and Ragona directed their film, zombies were still a largely unknown cinematic presence. But it is by now possible for scholars of film and television to speak of ideas and works that form "traditional zombie narratives."<sup>29</sup> Scholars suggest that aspects of key aspects of these traditions include rotting corpses and cognitive inability.<sup>30</sup> By 1964 however this tradition had not formed. Hammer's *Plague of the Zombies* (John Gilling) did not appear until 1966 and Romero's work until 1968. To step back a few decades from 1964, zombies had first made an impact in film in 1932's *White Zombie*.<sup>31</sup> That film's director, Victor Halperin, followed up with *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943). Zombies appeared only sporadically in cinema in the next two decades including in Jean Yarbrough's *King of the Zombies* (1941) and Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). These films followed a particular construct of zombies as mindless creatures under the spell of a voodoo zombie master in the Caribbean (or sometimes elsewhere, including the Cornish mines seen in *Doctor Blood's Coffin* in 1961 and *Plague of the Zombies*). The creatures were victims rather than threats; they certainly were not flesh eaters. Being located in Haitian cotton mills and other exotic (from a western perspective) locations (including Cambodia in 1936's *Revolt of the Zombies*), they were far removed from Middle America.

It's therefore notable that a major innovation and achievement of *Last Man* as an Italian-made film was to transition the figure of the lumbering ghoul from the Caribbean to that evocation of Middle America; ironic in that the filming was achieved in Rome. Similarly transitioned was the explanation for the condition of the creatures, as the film (following Matheson's novel) made no reference to voodoo. Two years later Hammer's *Plague of the Zombies* showed a Cornish tin mine operated by zombie laborers overseen by a voodoo master. But in another two years, Romero's ghouls may have been the product of a radioactive satellite, just as Matheson's were from a virus carried in the dust storms swirled up by nuclear blasts.<sup>32,33</sup>

In other words, for both *Last Man* and *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombie ontology is modern, non-voodoo and non-Caribbean, as it has

remained in almost all subsequent zombie films. Meanwhile, the zombie modus operandi has been to form large packs surrounding small numbers of human survivors. Matheson has stated that his inspiration for the story was reading *Dracula* and then extrapolating from there the idea “if one vampire was scary, a world filled with vampires would really be scary.”<sup>34</sup> As Clasen points out, Matheson’s novel is one of a number of 1950s works preoccupied with outsiders and alienation. Among these outsiders Clasen lists the vampire, whereas the zombie is aligned with “the masses and mindless humanity.”<sup>35</sup> Notwithstanding Matheson’s stated inspirational idea, both film and literature have not given us a world full of vampires. A world full of zombies however is a different matter and is delivered in *Last Man*.

### Transnational Horror

Out of these contrasts between the novel and its adaptations there emerge some ideas about the place of *Last Man* in a cultural matrix defined by competing transnational influences. This film has had a busy afterlife, and this is the case not only in terms of the two other remakes, but in the epistemology of the zombie, or what they do and how they are understood, which it gave to American cinema and which Italian horror makers later claimed back. This transition in status and meaning takes place as the American book becomes an Italian film. The capacity for stories and entire films to be translate from one culture to another is well accounted for in scholarly literature, including the tendency for one national cinema to remake the films of another (Wee 2014).

In the case of 1964’s film however the lines are not so clear cut, as the film as we have seen is the result of practitioners of different national cinemas collaborating. Adaptation theory points to the potential for adaptation to “indigenize” stories from one culture into the tropes and themes of the other. Matheson’s novel in fact undertook this process twice; 1964’s monochrome science fiction suggests what it was originally going to be: a British science fiction thriller in the style of Hammer’s black-and-white science fiction films *Quatermass Xperiment* (Val Guest, 1955) and *X the Unknown* (Leslie Norman, 1955). When this opportunity passed, the novel became an Italian horror movie. At this moment, the vampires turn into what we now recognized as a zombie.

Where did either creature sit in Italian cinema by 1964? The fascist regime of the 1930s and 1940s had banned horror films, but in the meantime as Boon points out the zombie as a cultural entity had been reshaped by western culture from Haitian and African ideas.<sup>36</sup> But early Italian horror efforts were not zombie horrors. Postwar, director Riccardo Freda and

cinematographer Mario Bava experimented to see if there was a domestic market for horror with *I Vampiri*, a low-budget period gothic horror of 1957.<sup>37</sup> They opened a floodgate of sumptuous gothic horrors.<sup>38</sup>

By 1964 Italian directors had been making horror films for only a few years, but Britain and America had considerably more experience. In this regard, *Last Man* is the inheritor of a number of features from its different routes, as the black-and-white science fiction resembles Hammer's *The Quatermass Xperiment* and *X the Unknown*, the first directed by Val Guest, who was to have directed Hammer's version of Matheson's novel. Italian horrors directors tended to favor color over black and white (as did Hammer), but the impression is not absolute. Mario Bava's breakout film *Black Sunday* (1960) is monochrome, as is *Nightmare Castle* (1965).<sup>39</sup> Both, however, are period films, placing Barbara Steele in palaces, catacombs and dungeons, the milieu generally favored by Italian horror directors in the 1960s. These baroque fantasies were usually sets rather than actual location.<sup>40</sup> Again, *Last Man* departs from this characteristic of Italian cinema, using actual (if mostly prosaic) Roman locations.

Reference to Steele indicates another characteristic of Italian horror by the early 1960s, in that foreign stars and crew had been making their way over Italy to participate in horror film production. Price's appearance in an Italian horror is matched by Steele, Boris Karloff, John Saxon, Joseph Cotten, Robert Flemyng, Christopher Lee and later Richard Johnson and Ian McCulloch among others appearing (normally dubbed) in Italian horror throughout the 1960s and 1970s, creating an international milieu on the sets of Italian horrors.<sup>41</sup> Salkow was not the only foreign director to work there. British director Michael Reeves did his first work as a second unit director on 1964's *Il Castello dei Morti Vivi* and the next year returned to direct Barbara Steele in *La Sorella di Satana/She Beast*.

If casting Price as a major overseas star was typical of Italian horror, his antagonists were not. This early burst of 1950s and 1960s Italian cinema had not included many zombies. Steele confronted a cataleptic vengeful woman in *Hitchcock*, but otherwise monstrous figures and revenants were of other types such as ghosts, the possessed or vampires. Placing horrors in modern suburbia, and the living dead in the clothes of everyday life, also were not strategies that Italian horror directors (nor their Hammer counterparts) had followed, until *Last Man*. However, the transitions created by this film influenced later strands of filmmaking. One is already mentioned: Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. This film was a major sensation in Italy, at least among the horror directors of the generation after Bava including Argento and Fulci.<sup>42</sup> Zombie films, often with special effects and a level of gore not allowed in Britain or the United States, appeared across the 1970s in the direct wake of Romero, including *Zombi 2*, an unofficial

sequel to the *Night of the Living Dead* and the same director's *L'aldilà/The Beyond*.

Here again we see *Last Man* in a transnational and adaptive context. The everyday milieu, contemporary setting and ordinary dress of the undead, as well as their appearance as a mindless, lumbering horde, recur from the 1964 film, which had in turn indigenized the novel. Significantly in his major studies of Italian cinema, Bondanella observes a menace that comes from the undead returning to attack the living and that the “relentless but slow” zombies of Fulci's films owe their antecedent to Romero, but the same characteristics have already been exhibited in *Last Man*.<sup>43</sup>

The comparisons of course are not absolute. In his important survey of types of zombies in both film and literature, Boon points out that the zombies of *Night of the Living Dead* are properly to be understood as “zombie ghouls.” Unlike the drones of the few earlier zombie movies from *White Zombie* onwards, the creatures in Romero's film are not reanimated slaves but have “agency,” in that they want to eat people.<sup>44</sup> The creatures in *Last Man* certainly want to kill Morgan, and when they do get their hands on him at one point certainly want to inflict significant damage, but they're not flesh eaters. They do, however, lurk en masse, vastly outnumber survivors, threaten civilization itself and appear on the exterior of the small world of the survivor's interior.

## Conclusion

If positioned as a transnational product, *Last Man* presents impressions of different points of origin and influence. In terms of origin, the film is a synthesis of American writing but Italian production, a combination of influences that expresses itself in remakes and in later native Italian horror. *L'ultimo uomo della Terra* was pulled in different creative directions and tried to be a number of things, from a vehicle for Vincent Price, to a vampire film, a science fiction film and at times even a romance. But it drew off a rich adaptive source and the many different parts of it, as well as its position as a transnational production, have since provided the means for further iterations of a story. It is film that will not die.

## Notes

1. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 6.
2. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 21.
3. Hunter, “Hang on a minute lads, I've got a great idea: three ways (not) to remake a British cult film.”
4. Matheson, *I am Legend*. 53.
5. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 20.

6. Ransom, *I am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations*, 62.
7. Jenks, "Steele, Barbara." 112.
8. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 6.
9. Cooper, *Witchfinder General*.
10. Bergan, "Sidney Salkow: First Class Master of the Second-Feature Movie."
11. Clasen, "Vampire Apocalypse: A Biocultural Critique of Richard Mathson's *I Am Legend*." 317.
12. Hunter, "Hang on a minute lads, I've got a great idea: three ways (not) to remake a British cult film."
13. Peacock, *Such a Dark Thing: Theology of the Vampire Narrative in Popular Culture*, 99.
14. Ransom, *I am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations*, 62.
15. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 49.
16. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 82.
17. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 11, 75.
18. Gochenour, "Zombie apocalypse and the utopian tradition."
19. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 39.
20. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 108.
21. Baker, *Science Fiction: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, 71.
22. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 10, 55.
23. Larrieux, "Racing the Future: Hollywood Science Fiction Narratives of Race." 93.
24. Sample, "There Goes the Neighbourhood: The Seventies, the Middle Class, and the Omega Man." 32.
25. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 103.
26. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 15.
27. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 35.
28. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 11.
29. Clarke, "The Resurrection Days Are Over': Resurrection from *Doctor Who* to *Torchwood*." 39.
30. Clarke, "The Resurrection Days Are Over': Resurrection from *Doctor Who* to *Torchwood*." 39.
31. Boon, "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture." 35.
32. Clasen, "Vampire Apocalypse: A Biocultural Critique of Richard Mathson's *I Am Legend*." 317.
33. Matheson, *I am Legend*, 44.
34. Brown, and Scoleri. "Richard Matheson Interview," *The I Am Legend Archive*.
35. Clasen, "Vampire Apocalypse: A Biocultural Critique of Richard Mathson's *I Am Legend*." 321.
36. Boon, "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture." 36.
37. Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 308.
38. O'Neill, "Black Sunday."
39. Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 307.
40. Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 312.
41. Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 315.
42. Bondanella, *Italian Cinema from Neorealism to the Present*, 326.

43. Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 422.
44. Boon, "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture." 38.

## References

- Baker, B. 2014. *Science Fiction: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bergan, Ronald. 2000. "Sidney Salkow: First Class Master of the Second-Feature Movie", *The Guardian* 10 November.
- Bondanella, P. 2002. *Italian Cinema from Neorealism to the Present*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Bondanella, P. 2009. *A History of Italian Cinema*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Boon, K.A. 2007. "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture." In *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, edited by Niall Scott, 33–43. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi.
- Clarke, J. "The Resurrection Days Are Over': Resurrection from *Doctor Who* to *Torchwood*." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (2015): 31–44.
- Clasen, M. "Vampire Apocalypse: A Biocultural Critique of Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*." *Philosophy and Literature* 34 (2010): 313–328.
- Cooper, Ian. 2011. *Witchfinder General*. Leighton Buzzard, UK: Auteur.
- Brown, David, and John David Scoleri. "Richard Matheson Interview", *The I Am Legend Archive*, 2001. <http://iamlegendarchive.blogspot.com.au/p/richard-matheson-interview.html>.
- Gochenour, Phillip. 2013. "Zombie apocalypse and the utopian tradition", Society for Utopian Studies Conference, Charleston SC.
- Hunter, I.Q. 2010. "Hang on a minute lads, I've got a great idea: three ways (not) to remake a British cult film", *Rewriting, Remixing and Reloading: Adaptations across the Globe International Conference*, Centre for British Studies, Berlin, 30 September 2010.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 2012. *A Theory of Adaptation*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Jenks, C. 1996. "Steele, Barbara." In *The Companion to Italian Cinema*, edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, James Hat and Gianni Volpi. London: Cassell/British Film Institute.
- Larrieux, S. 2008. "Racing the future: Hollywood science fiction narratives of race." PhD diss., Brown University.
- Matheson, Richard. 2007 [1954]. *I Am Legend*. New York, NY: Tor.
- Meikle, Denis. 2006. *Vincent Price: The Art of Fear*. London, UK: Reynolds and Hearn.
- O'Neill, Phelim. 2013. "Black Sunday", *The Guardian*, 2 February 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/feb/02/this-weeks-new-dvd-blu-ray>.
- Peacock, M. Jess. 2015. *Such a Dark Thing: Theology of the Vampire Narrative in Popular Culture*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Ransom, Amy J. 2018. *I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations*. Jefferson, IA: McFarland.
- Sample, Mark. 2002. "There Goes the Neighbourhood: The Seventies, the Middle Class, and the Omega Man." In *Shocking Cinema of the Seventies*, edited by Xavier Mendik, 29–40. London, UK: Noir Publishing.
- Wee, Valerie. 2014. *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes: Translating Fear, Adapting Culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.