

# Escape from New York, If You Can: A Review of *I Am Legend* and *Cloverfield*

By June Pulliam

*I Am Legend*. Dir. Francis Lawrence. 2007.

*Cloverfield*. Dir. Matt Reeves. 2008.

Perhaps when Rudy's 9/11 mantra ran out this political season in Florida, he should have tried chanting "I Am Legend" or "Cloverfield," over and over and over again. This winter has featured two films in which The Big Apple is destroyed: Francis Lawrence's expensive and well-publicized *I Am Legend*, starring Will Smith, and Matt Reeves sleeper *Cloverfield*. The low-key marketing approach of the latter was surprising. I saw not one television trailer, and the film boasted no stars I, or you, or anyone else for that matter, had ever heard of. *I Am Legend* is, of course, the film version of Richard Matheson's eponymous 1954 novella. *Cloverfield* is best characterized as *Godzilla* meets *The Blair Witch Project*. The apocalyptic New York of *I Am Legend*, with its abandoned cars and zoo animals roaming the city and weeds growing in Central Park, evokes the landscape of post-Katrina New Orleans, while the ruined Big Apple of *Cloverfield* in which towering skyscrapers explode into fireballs and crash to the ground is reminiscent of 9/11.

I had such great hopes for Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend*, the third attempt to date to bring to the big screen Richard Matheson's novella. The first version, *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), an Italian production of a concept passed over by Hammer Studios, starred Vincent Price, who was basically playing the character of Roderick Usher—laconically wandering through a bleak, post-apocalyptic suburban landscape. One could hardly imagine this Robert Neville staking vampires with relish. Director Ubaldo Ragona's film was dull and plodding, but at least he faithfully reproduced this landscape as originally envisioned by Matheson. The second attempt was the infamous *Omega Man* (1971). One could at least believe that this Robert Neville, played by Charlton Heston, an actor hardly known for subtly, gleefully staked his vampire neighbors. Boris Sagal's action-adventure version removed all of the contemplative elements of Matheson's original story, and while the film was set in the same Los Angeles of the near future that Matheson envisioned, the landscape is urban rather than suburban. Also, this low budget film had terrible special effects. In one notable scene, when Neville is confronting the group of vampires who nightly howl outside his window to encourage him to give up and join them, it is very obvious that the hooded members of "crowd" are several mannequins. I am recounting all of the failings of the past two films so that you can better understand what Lawrence's *I Am Legend* incorporates into its visual storytelling, and ultimately how the director utterly drops the ball.

The *New York Times* reviewer, as well as the film critic for our local paper here in Greater Stenchberg (aka Baton Rouge) liked the film, although A. O. Scott of the *Times*

had a few reservations. *I Am Legend* has a promising beginning. The story is updated to 2012, with flashbacks to 2009. And the world is not infected with a vampire bacterium that mutates and becomes windborne in the aftermath of a nuclear war, but by a mutated virus generated as a cure for cancer. The setting has been moved to New York City, in part for practical reasons. Robert Neville, this time played by Will Smith, is an Army officer with a background in immunology who stays behind in the quarantined city (the bridges are dynamited so that no one can get in or out by car or foot) to try and find a cure. Upgrading the character of Robert Neville to a high ranking military officer (one with enough money to afford a town house in Washington Square) takes away his everyman quality, but I could have lived with that if the rest of the film had been consistently excellent. The first half of the film is quite impressive: Neville recklessly drives his Mustang through the streets of New York City in a way similar to Heston's piloting of his sports car through similarly deserted Los Angeles boulevards. But even better is how the city looks. This landscape is reminiscent of what Alan Weisman in *The World Without Us* predicts New York (and all major cities) would look like after a mere three years if humans were suddenly wiped off of the face of the earth, or of the future world envisioned by Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*, once he and his Project Mayhem space monkeys destroy all the credit records and take everyone back to square zero. Neville's loneliness is underscored by his daily visits to a vacant Virgin Megastore, where someone has posed mannequins to look as if they are shopping customers. This scene echoes that infamously badly shot "crowd" scene in the *Omega Man*.

Everything is fine until the vampire-zombies show up. These CGI created creatures are neither the shambling mindless dead nor the more intelligent of their ranks from Matheson's novella. Instead, they are merely stupid and hairless things bent on drinking the blood of all mammals, a knock-off of the albino creatures living several miles underground in *The Descent* and the vampires in *Underworld*. I guess they're supposed to be spooky since they jump out from dark spots, but they're really just tiresome and predictable.

And then Robert Neville discovers that he is not the last man on earth when he meets a woman. In Matheson's novella, the desperately lonely Neville happens upon Ruth walking in the daylight, something the vampire-zombies cannot do. Since his social skills have gotten rusty from living alone for the past three years, he is unable to easily introduce himself to Ruth, and instead chases her until she falls, then slaps her in the face to "calm her down," before dragging her back to his house. Of course, Ruth is actually one of the infected, but one of the intelligent infected who are not the living dead, and she has been sent to spy on Robert in advance of others' raiding his lair. These infected have not been brain damaged due to any anoxia suffered in death, and have so far invented drugs that permit their kind to live without having to continually snack on the blood of mammals. They are working on restoring civilization by wiping from the earth the mindless infected dead. Robert is legend among these people as a vicious serial killer who has not only indiscriminately slaughtered both living and dead infected, but as a man who enjoyed his work a little too much. Both *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Omega Man* retain this ending.

Lawrence changes the ending completely, so much in fact that I just wanted to vomit. And I guess this is the place in the review where I should tell you to stop reading if you are planning on seeing the movie anyway, in spite of my attempts so far to discourage you from wasting your money.

Go ahead and avert your eyes. I'll wait.

Here goes: A despondent Neville tries to commit suicide by throwing himself into a crowd of the infected and pummeling them with his fists. He's rescued by Anna just before he passes out, awakening in his town home to find her and a boy she's brought with her. But Anna is not a faux uninfected. She is the real deal—a human survivor who came to New York City on a transport boat out of Sao Paulo before most of her fellow travelers succumbed to the virus. She tells Neville that she sought him out because God told her to, and she's on her way to rumored a colony of uninfected somewhere in Rhode Island. Anna has made a side trip specifically to find Robert because she suspects that he might be their savior. Actually, he *is* their savior, since the secret to of immunity to the virus resides in his blood. Unfortunately, a pack of infected set upon the highly fortified town house, and Neville will give his life protecting Anna and the boy so they can travel on with a vial of his blood to determine a cure. He becomes a legend to this new society not because he is a blood-thirsty monster from their perspective, but due to his selflessness. So the ending is utterly transformed from one that calls in to the question the boundaries between monster and human to feel-good nonsense that is not at all in character with the original. I was deeply perturbed by this saccharine Hollywood ending, and I can only hope that Richard Matheson, one of the masters of the sci-fi horror genre, earned some royalties from this film, as well as from the copies of *I Am Legend* reissued by Tor.

Now that I've hopefully convinced you to stay away from *I Am Legend*, or at least wait until it comes out on DVD, I want to encourage you to go out and watch *Cloverfield* **on the big screen**. Both *The New York Times* and Bob Mondello of NPR panned this film, and I nearly didn't go see it because of them. Fortunately one of the reviewers for our local newspaper raved about the *Cloverfield's* cutting edge story-telling technique and convinced me to plunk down my money at the Cineplex forthwith. The plot is basically this: during Rob's going away party, a large explosion is heard in the background, shaking his high rise building, to the alarm of all the partygoers. Soon huge chunks of debris rain on the city, including the head of the Statue of Liberty, which lands in the street below. People are running for their lives as more explosions can be heard, and skyscrapers can be seen falling down as quickly as they would if a terrorist had flown a plane into them. Rob and his friends make their way across town to rescue a long-time female friend with whom he has recently realized he is in love. After an argument, she had left the party earlier. The kicker is that she lives in the direction of the approaching destruction, and occasionally glimpses of a 100 foot reptilian creature can be seen from her apartment.

This film does not have much of a plot, but its genius lies in its story telling technique. We can witness the events of this summer day in 2008 not through the objective and

seemingly non-existent lens of the director, but through the videotape taken by Hud, one of Rob's party guests who was originally taping the festivities for the benefit of his friend. Now Hud refuses to put down his camera, no matter how much danger they are in, because "people will want to know how it all went down," and he is terribly aware of his responsibility to record history for them. So *Cloverfield* is filmed with a hand held camera that is obviously operated by an amateur. Hud has difficulty at times focusing or finding the light to illuminate shooting in total darkness, and when he first began taping, he lacked the foresight to check and see if the tape that was in the camera might have something important recorded on it. As it turns out, Hud has recorded over much of a tape that Rob had made previously, documenting one perfect day he spent with his female friend. The narrative of this tape frames the Cloverfield incident, and also pops up in the middle of the film, further breaking the proscenium. The audience is sitting in the theater watching Hud's video because—we are told in the beginning of the movie—it was found by the military in what used to be called Central Park, after the attack was contained.

What I like about *Cloverfield* is what the other critics who don't understand the horror genre hated. The dialogue is inane (which critics said made Rob and his friends appear to be dullards), and the plot is unbelievable. But then again, Godzilla (or a creature who looks a hell of a lot like her) is storming New York City. And ordinary people, for whom the concept of 100 foot reptiles laying waste to a major metropolis is about as inconceivable as the thought of terrorists flattening two of the largest buildings in the world was before 9/11, are reacting the way you would expect them to. They run and scream and do stupid things because they have no previous frame of reference for what they are experiencing. And if their dialogue is inane, it's because Reeves represents them as real people, young men and women whose dialogue is probably banal 95% of the time. For this reason, casting the film solely with unknown actors was a brilliant decision. If Will Smith were running from the monster, then we would probably expect him to leap 50 feet into the air and fell the beast with a roundhouse kick to the jaw, or something else improbably heroic. I can only fault Reeves for one thing, and it's a small one, but something any woman in the theater would have known. The two of the three women who try to escape with Rob and Hud run for miles throughout the city over rugged terrain, and they are wearing high heels. That was an annoying lack of realism (in a film which pretends to verisimilitude as its *raison d'être*), since the shoes would have hurt these women's feet so badly that they would have to abandon them after the first mile, perhaps looting some sneakers from one of the nearby stores. Other than that, I highly recommend *Cloverfield*. Perhaps Francis Lawrence should treat all of us who suffered through *I Am Legend* tickets.

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