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A Post-Apocalyptic Urban Crisis

The Omega Man (1971)

Jensen, Mikkel

Published in:
Speculative Fiction

Publication date:
2024

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Jensen, M. (2024). A Post-Apocalyptic Urban Crisis: *The Omega Man (1971)*. In *Speculative Fiction* (pp. 17-30). Aalborg Universitetsforlag.

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A Post-Apocalyptic Urban Crisis: *The Omega Man* (1971)

Mikkel Jensen

The 1960-1970s were troublesome years for America's cities. Facing deindustrialization, an exodus of white residents from urban centers to suburbia, and rapidly declining business districts in their centers (Boehm and Corey 268), American cities were in midst of what would become known as the urban crisis. Urban unrest and crime had come to mark urban life in America.

In July of 1964 in New York City, a police officer fatally shot a black 15-year-old, which spurred the first of what would become many urban unrests in that decade. 1966 saw 21 civil disorders and riots, a number that was nearly quadrupled in following year, which saw a total of 83 "major disturbances", many of which started after an incident involving law enforcement (Teaford 130-133). These events bore witness to the problems America's cities were facing in that era.

Crime was a central aspect of the urban crisis. From 1959 to 1968, robbery rates more than doubled, and by the end of the 1960s a majority of Americans saw crime as the premier urban problem (Teaford 138-139). At the same time, murder rates skyrocketed. By 1970, some US cities were so dangerous that people who would be born and live their entire lives there would be "more likely to be murdered by a fellow urbanite than an American soldier in World War II was to die in combat with Germans or Japanese" (Teaford 138).

The response of many white, affluent Americans was to turn their backs on the city and move to suburbia, taking their tax dollars out of central city coffers and placing them in suburban ones. The emergence of commuter trains and affordable cars made possible this exodus to the suburbs and by the 1950s the suburban lifestyle had come to be seen as a staple of American culture (Boehm and Corey 269-271). This challenging state of affairs for America's central cities got to the point that, in 1967, the US News and World Report asked whether "the big cities of this country ever [can] stage a comeback?" (Quoted in Teaford 125).

The urban crisis made its way to political discourse where, for instance, President Lyndon B. Johnson expressed concern for the state of the city. Unlike New Deal reformers, Johnson's liberal policies were explicitly concerned with American urbanity (Boehm and Corey 268). When LBJ launched his Great Society program he did so with explicit reference to the state of the America's cities, spurring young Americans to commit to the future of the country's cities: "It

will be the task of your generation,” Johnson remarked in his 1964 launch of the Great Society program, “to make the American city a place where future generations will come, not only to live but to live the good life” (Johnson 1964). More broadly speaking, the 1960s was an era when the urban issue was on the agenda. In 1962, historians Morton and Lucia White remarked that it, at that point in time, was “fashionable for many American intellectuals to express tender concern for the city’s future” (White and White 1).

The urban crisis also made its mark on American popular culture, particularly so with reference to New York City. Film scholar Lawrence Webb argues that films like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (1981) came to link the public image of New York City with the urban crisis, emphasizing issues like “the omnipresent threat of crime and violence, endemic corruption, drugs, prostitution, decaying housing stock, crumbling infrastructure, and industrial unrest” (Webb 80).

I will here argue that one part of this pop-cultural response to the urban crisis came in the form of dystopian science fiction film. Films like *The Omega Man* (1971), *The Ultimate Warrior* (1975), *Logan’s Run* (1976), and *Escape from New York* (1981) all depict urban areas as being marked by a crisis or as having massive problems in some way. Depicting cities as troublesome was, however, nothing new to science fiction cinema. Urban studies scholar John Gold argues that *Metropolis* (1927) cemented the idea in the world of science fiction that “cities might well be arenas of evil and repression” (339).

So by the time American urbanity was struggling in the 1960s and 1970s, the science fiction film already had a long tradition of debating the city. Science fiction scholar Vivian Sobchack remarks that the cinematic science fiction city in this era was “clearly dystopian and perceived as *asphyxiating*” (Sobchack 12). It is this phenomenon that I wish to dig deeper into to examine how science fiction cinema responded to pressing social concerns in the US during the years of the urban crisis. In other words, how did American science fiction cinema envision urbanity in the era of the urban crisis?

The Science Fiction City

Given the fact that the world has only become ever more urbanized in the last two centuries, it makes sense that many visions of future societies are urban ones. In a normative and almost syllogistic manner, urban historian Carl Abbott emphasizes science fiction’s relationship with the city: “Science fiction is about the future. The human future will be urban. Therefore, science fiction should be about urban futures” (Abbott 2).

The population of the US went from being primarily rural to being mainly urban in the 1910s, and today more than 80% of the population lives in urban areas. Yet by the year 2000, more than half of the entire American population resided in suburban areas (Boehm and Corey 335). Given the historical trajectory towards an increasingly urbanized world, it seems that our experience of social developments informs our conceptualization of narratives set in the future, which is the case with many science fiction narratives.

Historian Reinhart Koselleck argues that our *space of experience* informs our *horizon of expectation*, which is to say that our expectations of the future are always shaped by our experience of the past (Koselleck 256-257). Koselleck's argument explains why many science fiction narratives are urban ones. Urbanization levels have steadily increased risen in the modern age, and this motivates that visions of the future are urban ones.

In the US, an important aspect of the history of urbanization is its racial dynamics, which especially is seen in regards to the residential segregation of American cities. This state of affairs has arisen due to two major interlinked migrations within the US in the 20th century: The Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to (mainly) the urban North, which spurred a white exodus from central cities to the suburbs: "Between 1940 and 1970, four million black migrants left the South, increasing the black population share in northern and western cities from 4% in 1940 to 16% in 1970" (Boustan 417-418). This development meant that by 1980s 72% of African Americans living in metropolitan areas resided in central cities whereas only 33% of whites living in metropolitan areas lived in central cities (417). This development resulted in a situation of 'chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs' in the words of funk singer George Clinton (Avila 53).

Urban cultural historian Eric Avila reads alien invasions films such as *War of the Worlds* (1953) and *Them!* (1954) as indicative of cultural anxieties relating to this phenomenon. Avila argues:

At a time when blacks concentrated in inner cities in unprecedented numbers and when "whites" fled older portions of the city for the suburban periphery, urban science fiction thrillers such as *Them!* and *War of the Worlds* confirmed popular suspicions of American urban life (Avila 59).

Avila connects the influx of African Americans to urban centers and white suburbanization with the emergence and popularity of such alien invasion films. To him, this trend "suggests that mainstream white audiences may have viewed

the movement of blacks and other racialized minorities into the cities as not so much a migration, but rather an invasion of what had previously been white space” (Avila 56). The social-historical context that supports Avila’s interpretation of these films is exactly the increase of African American populations in many American cities. In Detroit, the black population tripled in the period 1945-1960 and in New York it rose by 2.5 times. This development was also particularly prominent in the L.A. area that, until the outbreak of WWII, had had a small African American population. That population, however, rose by a staggering 800 percent over a 20-year period: from 75,000 in 1940 to 600,000 African American residents in 1960 (Avila 57).

The challenges that followed in the wake of these developments eventually made their way to the big screen. Hollywood responded somewhat directly to the urban crisis, which, to film scholar Art Simon, is a contrast to how only a few films in this era addressed two other prominent issues of that era, namely the civil rights struggles and the Vietnam War and the protests against it (Simon 473). In the case of the latter, *The Green Berets* (1968) was released during the American military intervention in South East Asia, but most Vietnam War films were released after the US had exited Vietnam in the mid-1970s: *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a trend that only became stronger in the second half of the 1980s and into the 1990s as evidenced by the release of films like *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). In the case of the civil rights movement, America would have to wait until 1988 before Hollywood started making feature films about that movement, the first example here being *Mississippi Burning* that was released in December of that year (Letort 2012). As a glaring contrast to these trends, Simon notes that,

The cinema of urban crisis [...] pursued just such a direct engagement, albeit still cut to the measure of Hollywood’s genre demands, with a topicality rarely seen in the American cinema. In the process, the sociological literature about urban problems that came from journalists, academics, and government offices sustained a discourse that provided a backstory for virtually every film set in the city, a sense that no matter what story was being told on-screen, it echoed with the national conversation about the city in decline (Simon 472).

Simon notes how Hollywood *did* address the urban crisis while it was happening, but there is more to his argument that he himself outlines. Simon convinc-

ingly argues that *Midnight Cowboy*, *Coogan's Bluff* (1968), *The Detective* (1968), *Shaft* (1971), *Across 110th Street* (1972), and *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974) are urban crisis films, but we should also add an array of science fiction films to this corpus in order to understand more broadly the different ways that Hollywood addressed the urban crisis. This is the ambition of this article.

An early scene in the post-apocalyptic *The Ultimate Warrior* (1975) shows the Baron (Max von Sydow), the leader of an enclave of urban survivors, rejecting another man's critique of the community's living conditions: "Give him to the street people," the Baron proclaims, causing the critic to panic as he is rejected from the community. *Logan's Run* (1976) depicts a seemingly utopian future in which society has arrived at a 'sustainable equilibrium' because the city continually culls its population, so it does not put too big of a strain on the available natural resources, but this state depends on everybody reaching the age of 30 to be 'renewed', which, unbeknownst to the population, means that they are killed. Logan 5 (Michael York) is a "Sandman" who has to kill people trying to survive. But Logan 5 soon faces an eminent death himself and his only way of surviving is to flee the strongly regulated city. Another example of an urban crisis science fiction film is *Escape from New York* in which Manhattan has been turned into a maximum-security prison. Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell) is an imprisoned former soldier, who is promised a pardon if he ventures into Manhattan to rescue the President of the United States (Donald Pleasence), who is stranded there after Air Force One has been hijacked by insurgents.

All these films take on the urban crisis in extrapolated form. *The Ultimate Warrior's* fundamental setup is analogous to the gated community by virtue of showing urbanites to be dangerous criminals that people need walls to be protected from. In *Logan's Run* survival beyond the age of 30 is antonymous to urbanity and *Escape from New York's* vision of Manhattan as a massive prison is a most glaring example of cinematic anti-urbanism. Urban historian Steven Conn notes that many Americans "have rejected the city" and by the early 1970s "virtually everyone had given up on the American city" (Conn 5 & 194). This article explores how science fiction cinema played into this era's skeptical view of American urbanity.

More specifically, it presents a reading of Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man*, a cautionary tale about Robert Neville (Charlton Heston), who has remained within Los Angeles in a post-apocalyptic world at his own peril. By centering mostly on a single film, I aim to examine in depth how science fiction cinema envisioned urbanity during the years of the urban crisis. I will point out links to other urban crisis cultural texts, but nonetheless favor the analytical depth of looking at a

single text over the approach of giving a less focused and more general treatment of a larger corpus of films.

The Omega Man (1971)

The Omega Man (1971), an adaptation of Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend*, is premised on Neville surviving in a postapocalyptic Los Angeles. For two years after a weaponized disease has turned everybody but Neville into a form of nocturnal mutant, this assertive Heston protagonist has searched through this postapocalyptic metropolis in order to track down a band of mutants known as the Family, led by Matthias (Anthony Zerbe), which incessantly tries to kill Neville. *The Omega Man* shows its protagonist to continually fight off the Family who see Neville as the embodiment of the science-oriented worldview that allowed the world to end.

Neville refuses to leave the city even though it is driving him insane. An early scene shows pay phones starting to ring and Neville rushes to pick up a phone but pauses: "There is no phone ringing, dammit!" Neville yells after which the ringing abruptly stops. The use of subjective sound signals the emotional strain the post-apocalyptic loneliness has on Neville. Science fiction scholar Darko Suvin argues that "the attitude of estrangement ... has grown into the *formal framework* of the [science fiction] genre" (Suvin 7). The science fiction text shows us a world that is so fundamentally different from our reality that we are estranged from it. The tagline of *The Omega Man* reads that "The last man on alive ... is not alone" and the film's opening sequence shows Neville driving alone in a deserted Los Angeles. This establishes how this storyworld is different from the "zero world" that we viewers live in (Suvin's concept for the world in which a specific science fiction story was created), but the scene with the phone elaborates this textual feature by suggesting the human strain that this isolation has on Neville.

The Omega Man furthers this estrangement by including two scenes in which Neville wrestles with sexual frustration. At one point, Neville is in a car store to acquire a new means of transportation. He sees and subsequently tears down a pin-up calendar because it confronts him with his lack of sex. He later almost caresses a mannequin doll while walking through a department store. This further suggests the strain this deserted world has on his mental health. These two scenes develop the film's use of cognitive estrangement. Neville's celibate life is not thematically central to the film's themes regarding urbanity and its concerns about biological warfare, but this estrangement engenders a storyworld that seems fundamentally foreign to viewers in several ways. It develops the film's worldbuilding.

Urban Danger

One way that *The Omega Man* does mirror its zero world, however, is its depiction of urbanity as being synonymous with danger. An early scene shows the otherwise confident and assertive Neville nearly panicking when he realizes that he is in the urban core as the sun is setting. “My God! It’s almost dark. They’ll be waking up soon,” Neville exclaims. The viewer does not know exactly who “they” are at this point, but this line adds to the film’s estrangement at this point. Given the fact that Neville utters this line while being in the central city engenders a sense of urbanity as a place a person can only venture into with caution. But staying there after nightfall represents danger, even for a film hero like a Heston character.

Before realizing the sun is setting, Neville had been in a movie theater watching the 1970 documentary film *Woodstock* about the iconic 1969 music festival. Neville’s ability to recite the lines of the film shows how much he has watched the movie here but also suggests how much he misses any semblance of conversation with other people. In the film, an interviewee utters a thematically central line:

What’s really important is the fact that if we can’t all live together and be happy, if you have to be afraid to walk out in the street, if you have to be afraid to smile at somebody, right? What kind of a way is that to go through this life?

The interviewee’s hope of a life without fear speaks directly to Neville’s situation. The fact that *The Omega Man* quotes a real person saying this in 1969 in the film’s zero world is a way of saying that though this film’s take on urban anxieties and fear of violence is hyperbolic (as is natural for speculative fiction), Neville’s troubles with urban violence are to be understood as metaphorical for real-world concerns.

When we later see Neville attempting to track down the Family, we understand these efforts are meant to counter this situation where he is “afraid to walk out in the street.” His wish to make the city safe for himself to live in directly extends from the zero world’s concern for violent crime as expressed in the *Woodstock* documentary. The fact that Neville mimics these lines and the fact that he subsequently panics when he realizes that he is in the urban core as the sun is setting shows how *The Omega Man* presents the central city as a place of danger and as a place that Neville must avoid at night in order to survive.

Just one year prior to *The Omega Man*’s release, the 1970 US Census recorded a crucial shift in American social history. In 1940, only a mere 13 % of the Amer-

ican population lived in suburbs (Nicolaidis and Wiese 14), but thirty years later suburbanites outnumbered central city dwellers (Teaford 127-128). The post-war expansion of suburbia had included the construction of shopping malls and entertainment centers like movie theaters in suburban areas. Suburbanites no longer needed to travel to the central city to watch films on the big screen, but Neville nonetheless watches a film in a central city movie theater. Teaford notes in the case of New York City, “entertainment district was no longer as appealing to a middle-class clientele as it had been in 1945” (Teaford 2006, 130). There is a defiance in how Neville chooses to watch a film in a central city movie theater and in the fact that he stays in the city instead of fleeing it.

Faced with the hostile Family that continuously tries to break into his home, Neville has had to make his home into something of a fortress. Boarded-up windows are to repel attacks and mounted spotlights outside of his home help Neville keep the light-sensitive Family at bay. This visual representation of his home as an urban fortress underscores the troubled relationship the insistent urbanite Neville has with his city.

At one point, Neville does flee the city with the help of a band of young survivors. The leader of this group, Dutch (Paul Koslo), asks Neville “what keeps [him] in the city?” to which Neville retorts that “that’s where I live. That’s where I used to live. That’s where I’m going to live. And not Matthias or his Family or any other son of a bitch is gonna make me leave” (*The Omega Man*). Neville refuses to ‘flee’ to the suburbs or to the countryside. His sense of self and his life is tied in with his home in the city. His name also suggests his commitment to urbanity: Ne-ville. *Ville* is French for ‘city’ or ‘town’ and *nee* means to be ‘born.’ Neville is born in the city and that is where he will stay.

Neville ends up romantically involved with Lisa (Rosalind Cash) who is part of the group that Dutch also belongs to. At one point, Neville asks Lisa how she and her little brother Richie (Eric Laneuville) came to live with Dutch. Lisa jokingly tells Neville that “Dutch came by one day and said he was with the Census Bureau.” The characters of course understand this flippant remark as a joke, but from the viewer’s perspective this is a self-reflexive allusion to how Dutch had asked Neville a question that the Census Bureau would be interested in, i.e. why does Neville stay in the city? This joke underscores the film’s interest in engaging with urban problems and cultural understandings of urban issues.

This articulation of having the protagonist explicitly decide not to leave the central city parallels one of the inspirations of one of the other central urban crisis science fiction films, namely John Carpenter’s *Escape from New York* (1981). The opening titles of this film tell us that 1988 saw a 400 % increase in crime rates, which spurred the US government to turn Manhattan into a giant maxi-

mum-security prison. Political scientist Lyman Tower Sargent argues that dystopian fiction extrapolates elements from the real world as a form of warning (Sargent 8), which is very much the case with Carpenter's vision of New York. In extrapolated form, *Escape from New York* shows *in extremis* a belief that America's cities were beyond salvation. After twenty years of urban crisis, Carpenter envisions a New York so marred by crime that it makes more sense to turn it into a prison than it does to try to salvage this metropolis. Its dismal portrayal of urbanity is linked with soaring crime rates, which since the 1960s had been seen as an integral aspect of the urban crisis.

The film's narrative, however, is set in 1997 and shows New York to have fully deteriorated. Carpenter had been inspired by the portrayal of New York City in Michael Winner's *Deathwish* (1974) in which architect Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) turns into a vigilante after the rape and murder of his wife: "I didn't agree with the philosophy of it, taking the law into one's own hands," Carpenter said, "but the film came across with the sense of New York as a kind of jungle, and I wanted to make an SF film along those lines" (qtd. in Muir 21). *Deathwish* is arguably an urban crisis film so even though Carpenter does not explicitly discuss the urban crisis, his cue for envisioning New York City is directly inspired by a vigilante take on the urban crisis.

The Brian Garfield novel that *Death Wish* was adapted from interestingly echoes the rejection of the suburb that Neville expresses in *The Omega Man*. Paul, the protagonist of *Death Wish*, rejects the notion that he should leave the city behind and move out to suburbia. This insistence on remaining in the central city is key to some of these cultural texts on the urban crisis. This issue is closely tied in with American racial history.

The Urban Crisis as Racial Phenomenon

The influx of African Americans caused white flight in several in urban areas (Boustan 2010). Urban historian Steven Conn notes that "The flight from the cities was racial as well as economic. White people primarily left the cities; cities thus became increasingly black. Economic activity also left town, and cities became increasingly poor and black" (Conn 149). African American Studies scholar Adilifu Nama sees a direct connection between *The Omega Man*'s depiction of the Family and 1960s racial issues, noting that how the mutants throw Molotov cocktails at Neville's house at night allude to "the racial unrest of the late sixties that erupted across the nation with a spate of urban cities in flames" (Nama 48).

The Omega Man alludes to a racial dynamic regarding its depiction of a troubled city, but, at the same time, it also tries to downplay that dynamic. Neville jokingly refers to his blood, which holds antibodies to the disease, as "genuine

160-proof old Anglo-Saxon, baby,” a line that emphasizes his racial identity. But there is a mutual attraction between him and Lisa whose racial identity as a black woman is underscored by her donning her hair in a big afro and wearing a leather suit. These decisions regarding her hair and costume seems to be what leads cultural studies scholar Justin Sully to conclude that she “has clearly been modeled on [the African American academic and activist] Angela Davis” (Sully 2016, 105).

Neville and Lisa’s interracial relationship surely deemphasizes notions of racial antagonism at a point in time when the Supreme Court’s 1967 legalization of interracial marriage was still in recent memory (Brøndal 227 & 382). At one point, Matthias monologues about his disdain for Neville and searches for words which leads his second-in-command, Zachary (Lincoln Kilpatrick), to try and complete his line of thought:

Matthias: One creature, caught. Caught in a place he cannot stir from in the dark, alone, outnumbered hundreds to one, nothing to live for but his memories, nothing to live with but his gadgets, his cars, his guns, gimmicks... and yet the whole family can’t bring him down from that, that...

Zachary: Honky paradise, brother?

Matthias: Forget the old ways, brother, all the old hatreds.

Matthias is shown in flashbacks to have been a news anchor that broadcasts to America news about a Sino-Russian war that eventually spreads and ultimately leads to biological warfare, which most people die from and which mutates Matthias and the members of the Family. He consequently becomes an extreme Luddite, proclaiming that his hatred of Neville is rooted in him being, in Matthias’s words, “that creature of the wheel, that lord of the infernal engines and machines.” Yet when Zachary tries to help Matthias complete his line of thought by suggesting that Neville is living in a “honky paradise” Matthias downplays the racial aspect.

In this way, *The Omega Man* engages with the urban crisis in way that evades, or at least complicates, this issue’s relationship with racial issues. The white Heston character emphatically refuses to mimic the white flight that had shaped urban life for years when *The Omega Man* was released. *The Omega Man* wants to downplay that its take on the urban crisis is a matter of a white man staying put in the urban center being threatened by urban dwellers. But, as Adilifu

Nama notes, the film nevertheless racializes the Family as black in several other ways (even though several of the actors playing members of the Family are white). The Family shares “startling similarities [with] the Black Power radicals and movement of the late 1960s to early 1970s” (Nama 48). Nama also notes how members of the Family don dark sunglasses and exclusively wear “black robes and hoods, which work to code the colorless mutants as ‘black.’” They also give “soapbox speeches to their followers regarding the evil of ‘the Man’ (Neville)” (Nama 2008, 48). Nama continues:

Finally, in their condemnation of Neville, the mutants’ rhetoric mirrors the Nation of Islam’s extremist articulation of black nationalism. The Nation of Islam, a black nationalistic quasi-cult organization, advocated the idea that whites were “devils” united in systematically oppressing black people. Similarly, the albino mutants of *The Omega Man* rail against Neville, ostensibly the last remaining white man on Earth, by depicting him as the personification of evil and referring to him as a “devil” (Nama 2008, 48).

My point here is that even though Neville and Lisa’s relationship is depicted as uncontroversial and the fact that Matthias tells Zachary to “forget the old ways [...] all the old hatreds” when Zachary calls Neville’s home a “honky paradise”, the film nevertheless does racialize the urban crisis and the Family in several other ways. It tries to downplay the racial aspects of the urban crisis, but nevertheless emphasizes them at the same time. This suggests a form of cognitive dissonance or ambiguity in the film about how much to emphasize race in terms of understanding urban issues.

Lisa and Neville decide that if a serum based on Neville’s blood works, they will leave the city and move out into the countryside. The fact that this interracial couple leaves the city behind surely cannot be termed white flight, but this is a rejection of the city as a place of survival. Conn notes “that when Americans have imagined utopia, their vision is always rural” (Conn 308). Lisa and Neville do not so much seek to flee the city in order to seek utopia, but they certainly do leave a dystopian urbanity. In that sense, their aspirations mimic the anti-urban sentiment that followed in the wake the urban crisis.

Neville is indeed able to produce a serum and uses it to cure Richie who tells Neville where the Family is. Richie believes that the Family should also be offered the cure. Neville knows their skepticism of technology and that they would decline any such offer. Richie nevertheless goes to offer the cure to the Family.

Learning that Richie has gone to see the Family, Neville tries to rescue him, only to learn that the Family has killed the young man.

Meanwhile, Lisa has turned into a mutant and has let Matthias and his followers into Neville's house. They destroy his home and force Neville to watch. Neville manages to break free and go outside but Matthias hurls a spear at him, which fatally wounds him. Neville stumbles backwards into a fountain and ends up in a symbolic Christ-like pose.

This end shot is heavily symbolic, arguably suggesting that Neville's suffering and his ultimate sacrifice will be for the good of humankind. The following morning Dutch and his band of youngsters find Neville dying in the fountain. Neville hands Dutch a bottle containing the serum that cured Richie and then Neville dies. Dutch brings Lisa with them and they, presumably, leave the city. They do what Neville had wanted to accomplish but, thanks to Neville's actions, the band of young people are able to escape a corrupted urbanity and heal themselves. The underlying premise is that Neville should have left the city while he still had the chance, a sentiment that fundamentally shows the film to be an anti-urban cautionary tale.

Conclusion

The Omega Man addresses 1970s urban anxieties through an anti-urbanist vision of a doomed Los Angeles in which survival is unlikely. Its status as a cautionary tale is evidenced by the fact that the assertive and confident Heston protagonist ends up dead because he did not get out when he had the chance. John Gold argues that,

science-fiction films are intended less as projections than critiques. They extrapolate trends from the known world and crystallise warnings about their likely consequences. They warn what might happen if rather than forecast what will happen when (Gold 2001, 338-339).

The Omega Man's vision of a dystopian city is surely hyperbolic, but that is the how the post-apocalyptic genre engages with socio-political realities. It taps into the cultural anxieties regarding violence and murder in the American city. The surge of robberies, violence, murders, and crime in general in the 1960s had shaped American popular consciousness and made way for Hollywood's take on the urban crisis. As mentioned earlier, films like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (1981) have rightly been identified as urban crisis films. Adilifu Nama also connects *Escape from New York* to the

realities of the urban crisis (Nama 136-138). I believe that I have shown how *The Omega Man* engages with specific social-historical issues in a way that it makes sense to add it to the canon of urban crisis cinema. Tapping into a concern for the safety of urban life, *The Omega Man* engaged with highly current discussions when it was released in 1971 and ultimately cements a 1970s anti-urbanism by showing that the only way to live is to leave the city while you still have the chance. This was *The Omega Man*'s response to the urban crisis.

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