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From *The Last Man* to *La Jetée*: Pandemic, Posthuman, and the Popular Imagination

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ABSTRACT

This Paper traces the trajectory of the last human figure as a *Dasein* in transit toward post humanity, arguing primarily that the pandemic catastrophe functions less as an endpoint and more as a threshold state through which the human figure is reconstituted as something beyond itself. For this purpose, the paper primarily looks at Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), with Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), and Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Kairo/Pulse* (2001) presented as secondary reading. The argument unfolds in three tiers. First, it situates the pandemic in *The Last Man* as a culmination of the social, political and personal events surrounding the author, the spatio-temporal setting of the catastrophe as a way to situate the Anthropocene, and *The Last Man* as an isolated Posthuman figure in modern post apocalyptic pandemic fiction. It is to be argued that he is no longer the tragic culmination of humanism but a liminal consciousness inhabiting the ruins of the anthropocentric world. Brief comparative reference is also made to Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the Book of Revelation to locate this figure within a longer literary genealogy of plague narrative and apocalyptic witness. Ultimately, the paper contends that the last man is not humanity's end point but a mutative figure through which popular imagination reflects what survives, after the human.

Keywords- The Last Man; Posthumanism; Mary Shelley; La Jetée; Haraway; pandemic fiction; Dasein; post-apocalyptic film

"*We tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogy of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn't always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away."* (Camus 18)

From cave paintings to videogames, as a collective, humanity has long constituted itself through meaning-making, through creating a narrative that not only traces their achievements but also gives a name to their fears. Since by naming the monstrous, it occupies not just the space of being a chronicle, but also transforms into a testament, and a warning simultaneously. Thus, in the grand narratives of mankind, stories of a coming deluge[1], of the horsemen of the apocalypse[2], of locusts swarming[3], or a plague that sweeps over the entirety of earth, becomes central to the very idea of society itself. Therefore, from *The Book of Revelation* that in some ways prophesied the pestilence[4] to the COVID 19 pandemic, the narrative of the human evolution has to be traced in relation to an ever changing, ever evolving threat.

With a shift in the nature of the understanding of the apocalypse, a shift can be traced in the definition of those who are affected by it too. A sweeping global disaster like a pandemic lays bare the truth that the natural *umwelt*[5] and the one crafted out of manmade experience have a chasm between them: the gaping void between the two disparate threads of the universe, which is to say the human, and the non-human. But with the advent of the anthropocene the last two centuries marked a transient episode in which these two threads have become aligned, resulting in a re-definition of how we understand these terms. It is only through this alignment that we can begin to imagine and even experience a different kind of future, one which can accommodate the changing definitions of being human itself. As Haraway notes "The

1 Deluge has been featured throughout human history ranging from story of the Noah's ark in *The Bible*, to ancient Mesopotamia in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the Aztec flood story of Neta and Nena.
2 In Christianity, the four horsemen of the apocalypse appear in the book of Revelation (6:1–8).
3 Locust swarms devastate crops and cause major agricultural damage, which has historically often lead to famine and starvation.
4 "They were given authority over a quarter of the earth, to kill with sword, famine and plague, and by means of the beasts of the earth." "Revelation, Chapter 6". United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
5 umwelt (plural: umwelten) comes from the German Umwelt meaning "environment" or "surroundings"

Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before" (Haraway 100). Ergo, it not only becomes crucial to re-situate the idea of the *anthropos* within and beyond the context of an event as cataclysmic and as ever evolving as a pandemic, but also to see how the pandemic itself has been traced in different modes of narratives.

Thus, this paper explores the very shifting nature of the pandemic through and in popular imaginations. Furthermore, it intends to center the *dasein*[6] of *The Last Man* as a transitory phase to a beyond-human, or a Posthuman like figure: "The body is ... not simply an 'entity', but is experienced as a practical mode of coping with external situations and events." (Giddens 56). To accomplish the above noted, within the context of the paper, the argument will be structured in three tiers: centering the Pandemic in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* as a culmination of the social, political and personal events surrounding the author, the spatial temporal setting of the catastrophe as a way to situate the anthropocene, and *The Last Man* as an isolated Posthuman figure in modern post apocalyptic pandemic fiction. For this purpose the primary texts referred to in the paper are Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, the 1962 French science fiction featurette *La Jetée*, and the 2001 film *Kairo/Pulse* by Kiyoshi Kurosawa. It also makes passing references to *Decameron*, and *The Book of Revelation.*

"Apocalypse had (has) become banal, a set of statistical risk parameters to everyone's existence." (Giddens 183) And thus, the idea of an apocalyptic last man fiction had become part and partial of the early nineteenth century literary space. But even prior to that, throughout literary and narrative history, the plague has had many faces, in *Decameron* "the plague gathered strength as it was transmitted from the sick to the healthy through normal intercourse," but that was not end as "not only did the healthy incur the disease and with it the prevailing mortality by talking to or keeping company with the sick--they had only to touch the clothing or anything else that had come into contact with or been used by the sick and the plague evidently was passed to the one who handled those things" (Boccaccio 7-8). On the other hand in Defoe's writing, the plague, baring its ugly head was "a world of corpses strewn in streets and pits, yet in the deadcart itself a drunken piper woke (wakes) up to cry, 'But I an't dead tho', am I?'" (Defoe 89). Shelley was writing her novel *The Last Man* in the aftermath of a time that was marked by great cultural changes as well as new, unsettling discoveries that not only brought a new understanding but also challenged how people thought about the place of the human race in the world. Thus, *The Last Man* defines the pandemic in similar terms of the inevitable:

> "On the eighteenth of this month news arrived in London that the plague was in France and Italy....We were as a man who hears that his house is burning, and yet hurries through the streets, borne along by a lurking hope of a mistake, till he turns the corner, and sees his sheltering roof enveloped in a flame. Before it had been a rumour; but now in words uneraseable, in definite and undeniable print, the knowledge went forth." (Shelley 188)

With the discovery of the first recognized dinosaur bones in the early nineteenth century, a new understanding of species extinction gripped western society. Furthermore, the political and the geological climate traced an ontological rupture[7] in their foundation with two catastrophically depopulating events taking place: the horrifying bloodshed that marked the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815), and the rapid global cooling that could be traced to the massive eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815 which covered the skies in gray for years: "We heard the explosions here distinctly, and had some of the ashes. It was totally dark at Macassar long after the sun was up; and at noon, at Sourabaya, the sun succeeded in enlightening the good folks so far as to allow them to see some yards around."[8] A global famine steadily followed the Tambora eruption, and at the same time, the first known cholera pandemic was spreading throughout the Indian subcontinent and across Asia, from 1817 to 1824, until its terrifying development stopped in the Middle East. Placed in the context of these societal changes, as well as the personal tragedies surrounding her, Shelley's text meditated not only on the course run by ruined empires but also on the frightening and imminent possibility of human extinction.

Therefore, as established, Shelley was writing in a time of crisis. Thus, *The Last Man* became the culminating space where the widespread public fear and discourses regarding these changes was getting reflected. The book chronicles, within its pages, the journey of Lionel Verney, the last survivor of a mysterious plague pandemic, that ravaged the globe and resulted in the inevitable near-extinction of humanity. In the novel, the political structure of the 21st century is still dominated by the figures of monarchical politics. The book depicts a successful campaign to liberate Greece, and the city of

6 Dasein, sometimes spelled as Da-sein, refers to the German word for 'existence'. Introduced by Martin Heidegger as a fundamental concept in the existential philosophy, the word refers to the experience of a being that is peculiar to human beings.

7 Anthony Giddens refers to ontological security as a sense of order and continuity in regards to an individual's experiences. Thus any rupture in this continuity refers to a break in established paradigms.

8 The Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Advisor – November 30, 18115. The British paper printed a letter from a merchant in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) describing the scene.

Constantinople[9] is brought under siege by the allied Christian armies. But this point of the contact between the west and the east marks the beginning of the second and the apocalyptic part of the novel. The pandemic, from this point in the narrative, not just brought death to defenders of the city, but moved indifferently forward as it infected the liberators, and, within the span of a handful of years, spread all over the world : "Nature, our mother, and our friend, had turned on us a brow of menace." (Shelley 185) The narrative further moves along to reflects on the events as they happen in England. The novel betrays a sense of colonial anxiety of diseases being carried over from the east, while the west being assumed to be situated in a space of safety: "English for the most part talked of Thrace and Macedonia, as they would of a lunar territory, which, unknown to them, presented no distinct idea or interest to the minds" (Shelley). Similar ideas of superiority of the west found an echo in the earlier narrative by Defoe called *A Journal of the Plague Years*: "London may be a Pattern to all the Cities in the World for the good Government and the excellent Order that was every where kept, even in the time of the most violent Infection" (Defoe 149) But after a span of years, the whole of England was infected and human life, as it was known simply stopped functioning:

> "I contracted my view to England. The overgrown metropolis, the great heart of mighty Britain, was pulseless. Commerce had ceased. All resort for ambition or pleasure was cut off-the streets were grass-grown-the houses empty-the few, that from necessity remained, seemed already branded with the taint of inevitable pestilence." (Shelley 208)

As the plague took lives unceremoniously, at the end only one man remained, the narrator as the titular last man, reaching an empty Rome, from where he planned to sail around the globe in search of more survivors.

Finding the atmosphere as its central medium of propagation, the plague spread through the air rather than the link of direct contamination through humans. As climate changed, with England experiencing warmer weather, storms, and floods, the spread was even quicker and more effective. Thus within the context of the narrative, nature holds a crucial space: "We visited the so called Elysian Fields and Avernus: and wandered through various ruined temples, baths, and classic spots" (Shelley 5). In later pandemic narratives like *I Am Legend*, the roots of the plague can be traced to human interference. In the case of this particular film, an attempt to genetically re-engineer the measles virus to cure cancer becomes lethal, and goes on to infect 99% of the world's population, turning those it does not into cannibalistic mutants. In another film titled *12 Monkeys*, which found a lot of its threads in the 1962 French short film *La Jetée*, a manmade virus wipes out the majority of the human population and affects the environment. Thus nature, though central to these narratives, transforms from an agent to either the villain or the victim. On the other hand, Shelley's text reflects the lack of human agency over natural calamity. It traces the Romantic affinity towards nature and sublime, as it constituted of the basic understanding of being human. Shelley's text, with its central catastrophe removed from the spatio-temporal setting of the present, becomes a reflection of the anxiety of a shift away from the natural world. The bulk of the story is removed from the real time of the narrative as it is encapsulated within a frame tale. The frame story describes how the unnamed author discovered the chronicle in fragments, in the Sybil's cave in the nineteenth century.

As Antal notes, the "frame narrative projects The Last Man's testimony into the past" and in doing so created the "great cycles of man" where "the text still foreshadows a catastrophic future" (Antal 7). Thus the story follows the idea of the prophetic perfect tense[10] in its narration of the events : "Though this all happened so long ago and so far away that words cannot describe the time or the distance, it is also happening right now. Right here."[11] Verney, as the narrator problematizes the telling of a story with no one to hear:

> "I also will write a book, I cried—for whom to read?—to whom dedicated? And then with silly flourish (what so capricious and childish as despair?) I wrote, DEDICATION TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD. SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL! BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF The Last Man" (Shelley 371).

It is important to understand that the nature of the human response to an apocalypse often occurs on an individual and a communal level. But the urgency of this response is often limited in its attempt to try and solve it, and when that fails, to try and run away from it. To highlight the inevitability of the impending and imminent extinction, Shelley shifted the story into the ambiguous space "already happened" and "yet to happen." Therefore, for this story to be a testament and a warning simultaneously, Shelley creates a rupture in the temporality of time and shifts the narrative by presenting it through the prophetic cave of Sybil.

9 Present day Istanbul.
10 The prophetic perfect tense is a literary technique used in the *Bible* that describes future events that are so certain to happen that they are referred to in the past tense as if they had already happened.
11 From the intro of Matt Stover's novelization of *Revenge of the Sith.*

Sibyl in one of the original myths was a mortal figure who lived for about a thousand years. She was gifted this longevity by Apollo, who offered her the fulfillment of a wish in exchange for her virginity; she took a handful of sand and asked to live for as many years as the grains of sand she held. Later, after she slighted the god's love, he allowed her body to wither away because she failed to ask for eternal youth. Thus, Sibyl slowly withered away but her consciousness, prophetic nature, and voice remained. Since, the idea of the Posthuman is often adopted to identify the decentering of human exceptionalism, thus in this context, Sybil transforms into the beyond-human figure who lives on while everyone else met a mortal fate. This happens because it becomes pertinent to redefine the individual unit, against and in absence of the collective. In framing the narrative, she embodies a parallel commentary on the figure of Verney himself.

In its narrative structure, *La Jetée* follows a similar approach in shifting the apocalypse to the past and placing the protagonist in the future. Therefore, the only way for the protagonist to come in contact with the catastrophe is to rupture the ontology of the *umwelt* it occupies and cross into another. In *La Jetée*, the protagonist is sent back in time to call past and future to the rescue of the present, since he stands as the sole figure who has the clear memory of a pre-catastrophic world. This memory constitutes of that of the death of a man. As the protagonist accomplishes his mission, he is offered a choice to return to a time of his own choosing that would allow him to survive the catastrophe of his present. Hanich, the protagonist, chooses to return to the pre-catastrophe world and in doing so becomes the man whose death he witnessed as a child. Thus, the narrative follows a circular structure, as noted earlier in the case of Shelley's text as well, where the event has already happened and is forever happening. Thus, though Hanich dies, unlike the narrator of *The Last Man*, yet the circle of his life goes on indefinitely, marking him as not just an oddity but also a figure removed from the rest of the human population. Carol Mavor notes this temporality of *La Jetée* as "taking place in a no-place (u-topia) in no-time (u-chronia)" where by "u-topia", Mavor does not refer to "utopia" as the El Dorado of existence but rather describes it as an ambiguity of dystopia/utopio: "It is dystopia with the hope of utopia, or is it utopia cut by the threat of dystopia" (Mavor 60). Verney in the distant future, leaves in a boat looking for survivors while the world appears devoid of human presence. Thus he too dwells in this ambiguous space. By creating this distance and space, a narrative can be provided the scope of dual development: the transformation of the *Heimlich* into the *unhiemlich*, as well as the shift of the human into a Posthuman figure that can only exist outside of time.

In the strata of an apocalyptic space, the familiar has to be transformed into the unknown. To elucidate, in Kurursawa's *Kairo/Pulse*, which is characterized by a techno-pandemic leading to mass extinction of human society, the very nature of home changes into the domain that acts against you. The familiarity of the four walls breeds a loneliness that leaves no room for further transformation of self, into anything but nothingness. Similarly, in the Shelley's text, the natural world, which was the center of the Romantic sublime, slowly transforms into the monstrous on two accounts: first the plague which represents the unpredictability and impossibility of defining any event that is so beyond human understanding, on the other hand the shift in the Romantic conception of nature as well:

> "On the twenty-first of June, it was said that an hour before noon, a black sun arose... but dark, defined, whose beams were shadows, ascended from the west;... Night fell upon every country, night, sudden, rayless, entire...The shadows of things assumed strange and ghastly shapes…. The citizens were filled with greater dread, at the convulsion which “shook lions into civil streets;”—birds, strong-winged eagles, suddenly blinded, fell in the market-places..." (Shelley 178-179).

But as the narrative moves along, nature softly starts settling down. In the Last Volume, after the human race is closing in on its extinction, Verney, Adrian and their group of survivors reach the alpine valley:

> “We left the fair margin of the beauteous lake of Geneva, and entered the Alpine ravines; tracing to its source the brawling Arve, through the rock-bound valley of Servox, beside the mighty waterfalls, and under the shadow of the inaccessible mountains, we travelled on; while the luxuriant walnut-tree gave place to the dark pine, whose musical branches swung in the wind” (Shelley 338).

Thus, the *unhiemlich* of the monstrous nature does not return to familiar space but rather shifts to the 'defamiliarization' of nature returning to its beauty while humanity perishes.

From this ground of familiar turned unfamiliar, figures of Michi in Kurursawa's *Kairo* and Verney in *The Last Man* are born. Lionel Verney’s childhood can be traced in the Romantic idea of the stage of experience, where he as a child was not just orphaned, but also had become an outcast and a wanderer. Thus, Verney in the beginning of the novel occupied the space of being removed from society and only passes into a content stage of innocence when he reached adulthood and made deep human connections: “I now began to be human. I was admitted within that sacred boundary which divides the intellectual and moral nature of man from that which characterizes animals” (Shelley 20). Thus, only through relations,

through connections to people can the human be called human. In absence of a collective identity, the human loses its meaning and simply becomes an individual unit. Echoing Hume's lament in a way, it becomes pertinent to bring forth the question, who is Verney in this empty world? : "'Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return?" (Hume 316).

As the plague invades the planet, and leaves Verney as the sole survivor, he marks a return to the stage of experience. Shelley therefore, not just inverts the Romantic myth of consciousness but also creates the template for a figure that in some form is a departure from the ordinary. Therefore Verney, with the disappearance of the *daisen* of the "human" and of "being" becomes the transition to the Posthuman. As N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics,* notes that:

> "the Posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It Signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice" (Hayles 286).

Ergo, with the advent of an apocalypse, the meaning has to shift. But it is quite intriguing that within the context of the novel, another figure stands in contrast to Verney. In a small episode, a fanatic preacher calls forth the voice of religion and claims the plague will end if humanity repents for its sins. The plague kills all of his followers leaving him immune. Devastated, the leader commits suicide after confessing that he knew of no divine plan associated with the plague, and simply wished to manipulate people for power. In opposition to Verney, the leader is unwilling to transform, to become something beyond. He accepts the death of the collective as a signal for him to take his own life. Haraway notes a similar argument in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature,* that when bodies, "with the old genetic transmission" (here the fanatic belief system), do not kept pace with the new "language-produced cultural transmission of technology," (here marked by the transmission of plague), then social control breaks down, and the outcome is always pathological destruction (Haraway 35). On the other hand Verney, accepting of the change within him, notes:

> "... most willingly would I have placed my head on the sod, and closed my eyes on its loveliness for ever. But fate had administered life to me, when the plague had already seized on its prey.... I admitted her authority, and bowed to her decrees. (Shelley 337-8)"

Thus, Verney, like Sybil, becomes a part of the Posthuman narrative that remains once the collective has disappeared.

The story is mostly dominated by inter character relationships in the figure of Raymond, Adrian, Idris and Clara. While Adrian becomes a reflection of civilization itself, Idris remains the central focal point of love and affection for Lionel. The figure of the lover that Hanich returns to, leaving his own time in *La Jetée,* represents a similar connection. These characters are defined as human in context to the other characters who reflect a sense of community, a return to love, a connection with human society. Thus they mark the human part of the collective *daisen*. But a severance from these figures not just marks the journey of the protagonists from community to isolation, but also from humans to Posthuman since "a person's identity is not found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going." (Giddens 54) A break from the narrative of community to isolation becomes the central point in the transformation of identity of 'self'.

It is important to understand that Posthuman maintains an approach of emergent ontology rather than a stable one. To elaborate, the Posthuman is not a simply a singular, defined individual, but rather is one who can "*become*" or embody multiple identities and understand the world from different, heterogeneous perspectives. Therefore, with every new apocalypse, every new plague, every new end, a new understanding of the Posthuman emerges. In *Decameron*, the socio-political space of society is strictly dominated by the church. In such a world, the man of the 19th century with his knowledge of the stars, and slow but apparent advancement in medical science, becomes the Posthuman. Following this vein of thought, it becomes apparent that with every new understanding of an aspect of human existence and its association with its *umwelten*, a new definition emerges. Thus Peter Melville argues that Verney's despair becomes "a kind of antibody that allows him to live with and confront the devastation and loneliness of his tragic fate". (Melville 8) Lionel Verney, with his unique immunity, with his survival, and his return to the previous dimension of wilderness becomes a representative of a significant question: what does it mean to be human in the face of a calamity?

> "Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone at previous moments of Western social, political and scientific history." (Braidotti 1)

In the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic, the world has found a more intimate understanding of what it means to go through a collective tragedy. But an idea that took root during the years of quarantine was that following this tragedy, there would be no return to normal. For the idea of normal itself will have to redefined in context of the changes that we as a society, and we as individuals went through. The man that occupies the space of present is no longer the same figure that he was in 2019. COVID 19 taught people to reconsider our own biology's and to reflect on how we are placed in regards to nature, since "the body is in some sense perennially at risk. The possibility of bodily injury is ever-present, even in the most familiar of surroundings." (Giddens 126) This brings forth the question this paper has attempted to trace in its three tiered argument: Once you survive the 'End', are you not defined by being 'beyond' it? And thus ultimately, beyond all its readings, and in spite of all the ways the contemporary world has changed, Shelley's central statement regarding the understanding of humanity amidst calamity remains true: humanity is defined not by art, or faith, or politics, but by the basis of our communities, our fellow-feeling and compassion. And thus, when these threads disappear, it has to becomes the moment where we re-evaluate what it means to be human.

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