# *I Am Legend* as Philosophy:

# Imagination in Times of Pandemic . . .

# A Mutation towards a "Second Reality"?

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## Abstract

A planetary panic and almost deserted cities, fear of food shortages, and the growing threat of an invisible virus that does more damage day by day. In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, many believe that science fiction has now been overtaken by reality. In these times of adversity, what does it take to survive when the world comes crashing down? How do humans stay resilient, manage their growing stress, and somehow navigate through the crisis? More specifically, how do humans cope with isolation and loneliness in the light of a global outbreak? What does science fiction have to tell us about this? For the bewildered population, science fiction has been recognized as an ingredient to understand an unexpected reality. In this article I explain, through the philosophical eye of Francis Lawrence's movie *I Am Legend* (2007), how a coping skill such as imagination, in the age of pandemics and social distancing, can mutate into a "Second Reality" that fills the gap left by the former (pre-outbreak) reality.

Keywords: Sci-fi, Imagination, Second Reality, Mutation, Pandemic, *I Am Legend*.

Our contemporary era, in the year 2021, sees humanity at the pinnacle of its historical development in terms of scientific and technological advancement. Through the decades, humanity has increased its ability to organize, control and change the world; to make the world more predictable. However, a microscopic virus named COVID-19 has caused havoc across the globe, putting our scientific techniques to the test, and thereby putting humanity itself to the test. Due to a global panic, cities that seem abandoned, the specter of food shortages, and the growing threat of an invisible virus that threatens the livelihood of millions daily, many believe that science fiction has now been overtaken by an almost dystopian reality.

Following the dramatic spread of COVID-19 at the start of 2020 there has been a strong uptick of sci-fi references in the public discourse. These sci-fi mentions include, amongst others, movies such as *Contagion* (2011), *Carriers* (2009) and *I Am Legend* (2007), TV shows such as *Containment* (2016), *The Last Ship* (2014) and *The Rain* (2018), and novels such as *The Stand* (1978) by Stephen King and *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel. For the bewildered population, science fiction has been

recognized as a point of reference to understand the unexpected reality that the pandemic has brought about. Many argue that science fiction is concerned with the future, not simply as a tool of prediction but as one of extrapolation and interrogation (Huntington 1975). In times of adversity, we find that science fiction serves to fuel our imagination and to shed light on various pandemic scenarios while allowing us to conceptualize what may await us at the end of it all. The dystopian images of global pandemic that science fiction presents seem highly prescient and applicable to the pandemic scenario of social distancing, contamination, and quarantine that we are seeing play out in our everyday life. I posit that there is an overlap between these two worlds—that of our reality and of sci-fi. In this sense, we may ask what science fiction can tell us about human resilience. How do humans cope with global, life-affecting crises? And more specifically, how do humans cope with isolation and loneliness in light of a global outbreak?

In this paper, I examine the concept of "imagination" as a coping skill during social isolation, through the philosophical lens of science fiction, with particular reference to Francis Lawrence's film *I Am Legend* (2007). However, before I dive into the analysis of the movie, this paper will provide a brief history of pandemic scenarios in science fiction and sketch their relation to the historical eras wherein such works were produced, followed by a brief discussion on how philosophical thinking figures into science fiction. Following this introductory reflection I will begin my analysis of the film with a discussion on the use of imagination to counter the isolation of a global pandemic. I will then explain how, in time of pandemic and social distancing, imagination can mutate into a *second reality* that serves as a substitute for pre-apocalyptic reality (when socialization was taken for granted) and co-exists with the current "gloomy" everyday reality without undermining it; this in contrast to the *second reality* of pathological cases, wherein the individual loses touch with their "real" reality. In other words, in this paper I will explain how, in times of crisis, the imaginary act—as a coping mechanism—can mutate into a *second reality*, that goes on negating the gloomy *real reality*, temporarily and consciously, in a quest for freedom and liberation.[1]

## Pandemic Scenarios: Between Reality and Science Fiction

Science fiction has long been a stage for stories of global disasters involving chaos, destruction, and transformation. Many consider Mary Shelley the mother of modern science fiction due to her novel *Frankenstein* (1818) (Freedman 2002, 258). In 1826, in her apocalyptic, dystopian science fiction novel *The Last Man*, she imagines a devastating plague affecting humanity at the end of the 21st century, which leaves alive only one living human being on the surface of the Earth. Her novel was particularly relevant at this time as the world was on the cusp of the second cholera pandemic outbreak (1826–1837), which reached from India across western Asia into Europe, Great Britain, and the Americas, as well as east to China and Japan. The 19th century was marked by many viral and bacterial outbreaks[2], and the fear of a deadly epidemic became a primary inspiration for many famous stories such as Edgar Allan Poe's novel *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) and Jens Peter Jacobsen's short story entitled *The Plague in Bergamo* (Pesten i Bergamo, 1882).

Taking thus its inspiration (at least partly) from reality, the pandemic subgenre continued to evolve. Science began to fill in the gaps concerning disease (that had previously been speculation) in the 1890s. The acceptance of the germ theory of

disease[3] led to a golden era of bacteriology, which served as inspiration for a large number of stories imagining the weaponization of microbes. In the novel by Neville Potter *The Germ Growers* (1892), extraterrestrial beings use airships, invisibility, and biological weapons to conquer the Earth. Seven years later, the Martian invaders of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898) are defeated not by the military forces of humanity, but by earthly germs. Jack London's short story, *The Unparalleled Invasion* (1910), describes China as the victim of Western biological weaponry that leads to the complete annihilation of the Chinese people. Two years later, his novel *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) sees London writhe in the terror of a disease for which scientists fail to find a cure, resulting in the depopulation of the planet.

In the middle of the 20th century, Karel Čapek uses the narrative of the epidemic to satirize his contemporaries with his play *The White Disease* (Bílá nemoc, 1937), which warns against the onset of fascism. Epidemics increasingly become a way to voice contemporary horrors (totalitarianism, communism, fascism), particularly as is represented in Albert Camus' philosophical novel *The Plague* (La Peste, 1947), wherein Camus employs the epidemic as a symbol to denounce war, occupation, and oppression.

The outbreak of new pandemics keeps haunting humanity, functioning as a concrete memento that new infectious diseases may still plague humanity every now and then. From the Asian flu pandemic (1957–1958) to the seventh cholera pandemic (1961–1975) to the Hong Kong flu pandemic (1968–1969), such infectious diseases seem to be a recurring facet of human society. A new upsurge of interest follows these outbreaks, typified in Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend,[4] The Andromeda Strain* (1969) by Michael Crichton and *The Stand* by Stephen King (1978). In the latter, a constantly shifting antigen virus exterminates over 90% of the human population.

The 1980's saw the rise of public fears regarding genetic engineering and the potential for the weaponization of microbes (which moves beyond the classic contagion). The dread of bacteriological warfare at this time was seen in novels such as *The Eyes of Darkness* (1981) by Dean Koontz *and The White Plague* (1982) by Frank Herbert.

A few years later, as a criticism of the conservative responses to HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, Norman Spinrad published his novel *Journal of the Plague Years* (1990), and two years later Nicola Griffith wrote *Ammonite* (1992) to address questions of gender and society through the lens of a deadly virus narrative. Mario Bellatin, in his novel *Beauty Salon* (1994), and José Saramago in his novel *Blindness* (1995), addressed the government's response to the plague epidemic outbreak.

The 2000s and 2010s saw renewed epidemic outbreaks, from the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the H1N1 flu pandemic in 2009 to the Ebola outbreak (2014–2016). The past decades have witnessed the proliferation of creative works featuring imaginary epidemics and pandemics, with video games like *Infected* (2005) and *Tom Clancy's The Division* (2016), to movies such as *Blindness* (2008), *Daybreakers* (2010) and *Contagion* (2011), and novels such as *Severance* by Ling Ma (2018) and *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel. Although novels and short stories form the foundations of science fiction, electronic media such as movies, TV and video games have arisen as similarly influential, experimental, and exciting ways to explore the genre, particularly in terms of the pandemic narrative.

From the classic contagion to zombies, from the post-apocalypse to the post-outbreak, sometimes with aliens thrown into the mix, many writers and movie directors reflected broader fears regarding the eventuality of an outbreak.

## Science Fiction and Philosophy

Against this background, what does science fiction have to tell us about human resilience in the current pandemic? How does it survey the situation through a philosophical lens? Diverse literary genres raise philosophical questions. Crime movies question the concept of justice, while melodramas and romantic comedies question the concept of love. However, it is a particular attribute of science fiction to ask philosophical questions and speculate in an imaginative manner on philosophical themes such as human nature, personal identity, reason, materialism and so on.

Science fiction urges us to ask the challenging question, "What if?" It is one of the primary ways in which society may think about many philosophical issues, and the genre intersects with almost every major philosophical topic. We see questions on personal identity arise in *Doctor Who* (Stokes 2010); dualism vs. materialism in *The Walking Dead* (Hawkes 2012); the concept of beauty and ugliness in *Frankenstein* (Rodríguez 2013); good and evil in *Dune* (Riches 2011); the concept of time in *Star Trek* (Kind 2008); mind vs. matter in *Transformers* (Pike 2012); the death of the subject in *Matrix* (Barwick 2002); the question of free will in *Inception* (Fitzpatrick and Johnson 2011). These philosophical ideas continue to run rampant through the sci-fi world. David Kyle Johnson notes:

> But science fiction, for all its futurism and outlandish flourishes, is not limited to these theoretical concepts; it is also a window into crucial discussions about the here and now, questions concerning ethics, power, religion, tolerance, social justice, politics, and the many practical dimensions of living in a world that is constantly changing and forever presenting humans with fresh new dilemmas to solve. (2018, 2)

In a world where humans have taken for granted how much socializing they do in a day (from engaging in-person with friends and family to small talks with the waiter at the restaurant or the mailman on the street), the pandemic has served to decenter our everyday social acts. Beyond questions of introversion or extroversion, it became clear that everyone had certain ways to socialize in pre-pandemic times that required the presences of others. When such direct engagement fades away it is quite disrupting of the normal ways of conducting social engagement, but it is also disrupting mentally. Isolation is an ordeal for those who experience it. Being separated from loved ones, and being surrounded by uncertainty over one's disease status can trigger significant concerns even before one takes account of the loss of freedom and the monstrosity of ennui that the pandemic has entailed. Inevitably, such loneliness stems from this conflict between what one is experiencing and what one desires. In times of adversity, what does it take to survive when the world comes crashing down? Human resilience is faced with a challenge, a challenge that science fiction has long been describing.

## Coping mechanisms in times of pandemic

Humans are in perpetuity faced with difficult or dreadful conditions, and they are compelled to find effective ways to cope with and rebound from such conditions. The permanence of such conditions is precisely why coping is a crucial human behavior, one

that is indispensable for effectively going through the challenging and gloomy obstacles of life. Coping refers to

> the human behavioral process for dealing with demands, both internal or external, in situations that are perceived as threats. This can mean doing what is necessary at the time to deal with a situation in the safest or easiest way. (*Alleydog Online Glossary*)[5]

There are moments in life where we have to cope with things that are external to us (external demands), and other times with things that are within us (internal motivations, fears). Yet, in some cases, we must deal with both internal and external demands concurrently.[6] Another definition for coping, from psychologists Lazarus and Folkman, states that coping entails "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage (master, reduce, or tolerate) a troubled person-environment relationship" (1985, 152).

It is important to note that a "coping mechanism" differs from a "defense mechanism" in that the latter is generally an unconscious process that people unwarily use. Meanwhile, "coping mechanisms" are consciously used to manage or deal with stressful events with the intention of maintaining people's emotional well-being (Good Therapy, 2016). A variety of coping strategies have been identified, one being the emotion-focused strategy that utilizes "brooding, imagining or magical thinking, avoiding or denying, blaming, or seeking social support" (Ackerman 2020, par. 21). While coping mechanisms may appear to be merely a strategy to overlook problems, such strategies are based on the recognition that in some cases we have no power over the problem we are experiencing. It is in these cases that it becomes vital to focus on the one thing that we can keep in check, namely ourselves, and it is quite relevant to the current situation of a global pandemic (which functions beyond the control of any one individual).

In terms of isolation, we find that coping responses vary according to personality, social environment, and especially the nature of the stressful situation (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010). In 1949, Edith Bone—a medical professional, journalist, and translator—managed to avoid the mental instability that generally accompanies isolation, during the seven years she spent imprisoned by the Hungarian communist government, by developing a series of mental exercises, including reviews of the six languages she spoke fluently and vocabulary exercises (she made letters out of the dense black bread she was fed, from which she composed poetry). She also took herself on "imaginary walks through all the cities she'd visited. She strolled the streets of Paris and Rome and Florence and Milan; she toured the Tiergarten in Berlin and Mozart's residence in Vienna" (Harris 2017, par. 9).[7] Throughout a decade of solitary confinement, Hussain Al-Shahristani, who had been  Saddam Hussein's chief nuclear adviser, preserved his sanity by "taking refuge in a world of abstractions, making up mathematical problems, which he then tried to solve" (Neilson 2016, par. 8). The Norwegian psychologist Gro Sandal has interviewed many adventurers who operate in isolated places concerning how they cope in extreme environments. She found that "the landscape itself can serve as an effective surrogate, drawing them out of themselves into the beauty or grandeur of their surroundings," and she agrees that "transcending the reality of your situation in this way is a common coping behaviour. It allows people to endure danger. 'It makes them feel safer. It makes them feel less alone.'" (Bond 2014, 156–155).

Solitude and isolation may therefore often be "painful things and beyond human endurance," as the French writer Jules Verne put it (*The Mysterious Island*, 392). However, we should not trivialize the power of our imagination to keep us safe and sane under such circumstances.

**Imagination as a coping mechanism**

Elizabeth Picciuto and Peter Carruthers, in their work *Imagination and Pretense*, define imagination as "a form of non truth directed thought [...] To imagine something, then, is to entertain a representation of an event or state of affairs without believing that it exists" (2016, 316). Jean-Paul Sartre in his work The *Psychology of Imagination* (1965) explains that imagination is an act of conscience which negates the reality to create a world of unreality,[8] wherein "the imaginative consciousness presents its object as *if it* were real" (Kearney 2003, 226). It is a "moment of freedom in which consciousness through the negation of reality can entertain a number of possibilities for action and can ultimately change its environment" (Steeves 2000, 38).

Amy Kind and Peter Kung introduce us to two distinct and supposedly incompatible kinds of uses of imagination in their book *Knowledge through Imagination* (2016). On one hand, imagination is sometimes used to allow us "to escape or look beyond the world as it is, as when we daydream or fantasize or pretend," which is called the *transcendent use of imagination*. On the other hand, imagination is also something used to allow us "to learn about the world as it is, as when we plan and make decisions or make predictions about the future," which is called the *instructive use of imagination* (Kind & Kung 2016, 1–37).

The aforementioned account suggests that imagination may be an essential element in our attempt to learn about the world in which we live. However, a sole focus on imagination as a means of knowledge diminishes the fact that the imaginary may also be acknowledged as a means to escape from the depressing and uncertain everyday reality. In this paper, I will refer to "imagination" as the coping ability that stems from a void in someone's life, thus the ability to produce and feign emotions and ideas, which originate from within through the recreation of past experiences or the invention of new ones.

From this perspective, Sartre (1965, 4–19) distinguished four key characteristics of the imaginative activity: (1) Act of consciousness: the image is not merely a thing placed in someone's memory, it is an act initiated by the consciousness in order to view an object in an unrestricted way. (2) Quasi-observation: Image allows us to view things in their absence, thus the object cannot be fully observed as in the reality of the percept, and can only be quasi-observed within the realm of imagination. (3) Spontaneity: in contrast to the constraint of perception, the image is spontaneous in a way that it creates its meaning from itself; and last but not least (4) Nothingness. Sartre exemplifies nothingness as follows: "'I have an image of Peter' is equivalent to saying not only 'I do not see Peter', but also 'I see nothing at all.'" [17] In light of this, imagination, can be said to be the coping ability that helps represent alternatives to the present reality, to travel in time beyond the here and now, to create a world beyond one's perspectives and to deal with intolerable or inescapable realities. Many who experience isolation use imagination as a coping mechanism to fill the void in their lives. In Sartre's words, imaginative consciousness is an "incantation destined to produce the object of one's thought, the thing one desires, in such a way that one can take possession of it" (177).

### *I am Legend* (2007): Imagination in Time of Pandemic

All things considered, I examine how imagination, as a coping skill during times of crisis, mutates into a neo-form, i.e. a *second reality*. The analysis of this coping strategy will be conducted through the philosophical perspective of Francis Lawrence's pandemic movie *I Am Legend* (2007).

The film is set in the middle of a pandemic outbreak, showing infected people turning into zombie-like hordes that only come out after sunset to feed. The rapid spread of the virus has wiped out much of humanity. Neville (played by Will Smith), a virologist for the U.S. Army, has remained in New York City after the city was placed under military quarantine. Neville is entirely isolated from other human beings, and has only his dog Sam for companionship. Throughout the film it becomes clear that he considers himself the last remaining healthy man, for Neville is curiously immune to the virus, and that his current task is to find the antidote that will allow the zombie-like victims of the outbreak to be cured and thus to regain their humanity.

### The pretend play: Neville's daily dose of escapism

Sunrise signals that it is time for Neville to start his day. After a workout session, he checks the progress of his research and experiments on rats, his attempts at finding a cure for the outbreak. Once done with his morning routine, he heads to the record shop with Sam. At the entrance, he greets Marge and Fred:

> Hey!
>
> Good morning, Marge.
>
> Good morning, Fred.
>
> What are you guys doing here so early?
>
> That's a nice sweatshirt there, Fred.
>
> Don't set it down anywhere.
>
> I'll see you guys inside. (*I Am Legend*)

In a pre-apocalyptic world, this seems like an ordinary conversation between friends. However, in a post-apocalyptic world in which Neville is the only survivor, such a conversation is part of what can be called a *pretend play*. Marge and Fred are not real people, but shop dummies.

Haight et al. note that "pretend play (sometimes called 'symbolic play') is early to develop and universal among humans" (Picciuto and Carruthers 2016, 314).[9] An imagination-oriented play assists in the development of children's language and social skills, and it is mostly—but by no means exclusively—associated with children. For adults, such pretend play may be a way of coping or may be indicative of a strong imagination; through pretend play one chooses willingly to be in the skin of someone else, to trade the real for the unreal. Pretend plays can be the continual demolition and resurrection of someone's "narrative identity" (Kearney 2003). Simply put, pretend play enables us to explore other alternatives of existence beyond what our reality has to offer; it is the realm of the *as if* "where everything is permitted, nothing censored" (Kearney 2003, 368).

After complimenting his imaginary friend Fred on his sweatshirt, Neville enters the store and waves to a family of shop dummies on his way to the record shelf. As he continues the pretend play, he notices a mysterious "girl" and shyly glances at her. He hesitates for an instant, considering whether to speak to her or not, before he takes his leave. On the way out, he stops by the counter, greets the shop dummy Hank (the owner of the record store), and asks him about the mysterious girl:

> Good morning, Hank.
>
> I'm midway through the G's.
>
> Hey, who's the girl in?
>
> Never mind.
>
> Hey, I'll see you in the morning.

Importantly, he says "I'll see you in the morning." It clearly seems that he returns again and again to the same pretend scenarios; according to Sartre (1965) the nothingness of the imaginary world establishes itself as "temporal unreality"; in contrast to real time, "the imaginary time of reverie, dream, fiction or art, etc. can be slowed down or accelerated at will; it can also be reversed, *repeated* or synthesized into numerous configurations of past, present and future" (Kearney 2003, 228; emphasis mine). The repetitiveness (throughout a period of time) of this imaginary process offers Neville a sense of certainty, predictability and above it all of control,[10] what he lacks in his *real reality*. The pretend play seems to show Neville's deteriorating mental state, but such play may in fact be preventing such deterioration in a world where he is all by himself, a world with only Sam the dog, a non-human entity, for company. The shipwrecked mariners cast away on islands have been known to "anthropomorphize inanimate objects, in some cases creating a cabal of imaginary companions with whom to share the solitude" (Bond 2014, 155). In 2005, solo sailor Ellen MacArthur expressed how—during her record-breaking solo circumnavigation of the globe—she had created a strong emotional bond with her boat. She nicknamed her trimaran *Mobi* and throughout her journey, "she signed emails to her support team 'love e and mobi', and in her published account uses *we* rather than *I*" (Bond 2014, 155). *Castaway* (2000), a film that prominently deals with isolation, brings to light the imaginary friend phenomenon with the intimate "friendship'" that forms between Hanks and his co-star Wilson (the volleyball); the film shows how humanization of the latter occurs, which "is not the result of any kind of mental collapse or schizophrenic episode, but it is in fact a fairly rational response to his crumbling sense of self" (Barnard 2015, 33). In both *I am Legend* and *Castaway* the main source of suffering is psychological (i.e. related to isolation), and each character finds themselves in a relentless struggle to maintain their sanity in the face of human companionship' absence.

For Neville, the pretend play acts as an "analogy" to his pre-apocalyptic reality. For Sartre the imaginary activity requires a sort of perceptual means in order to come into effect. "I have recourse to a certain material which acts as an *analogue*, as an equivalent, of the perception" (1965, 23). For example "a photograph provides the material for seeing my absent friend, and a mime the proper gestural material for the creation of an image. The material of the photograph, however, is negated, and operates as a background for my friend's absence now made apparent to me" (Steeves 2000, 76).

In light of this premise, Neville's pretend play allows him to see the invisible through the visible, see his former social existence (invisible) through the record shop and the shop dummies (visible). By means of the content of this analogue Neville makes the absent present: "the inner lining of the analogue is its very reference to the object as not there, as only 'quasi' present" (78). Simply put, Neville's pretend play gives an alternative life to these shop dummies as well as to him, the life of the imaginary and unreal characters they personify.

With this in mind, "while imagination gives us a basic freedom from the constraints of the real world, it can easily result in our enslavement to an unreal one" (Kearney 2003, 231). According to Sartre, while imagination "allow us to transcend the determining constraints of reality, this freedom is often purchased at the cost of a certain fatality" (Kearney 2003, 234); it may go on negating the real and the imaginary giving way to a pathological imagination, a delusional realm that blurs the separation line between perception and imagination.[11]

### The pretend play: Imaginary act, Delusion or Second reality?

Neville has been capturing and conducting experiments on contaminated survivors, known as the "Darkseekers," as part of his project to find a cure for the raging virus.[12] Consumed by the rage of losing their peers, these creatures have been observing Neville and have decided to set a trap for him, using his imaginary friend Fred as a lure.

On the morning of his birthday, while patrolling around the city and talking to Sam, Neville sees a figure. He stops the car, puts it in reverse. Indeed, there is a figure standing on the other side of the bridge. It is his imaginary friend Fred's silhouette, and Neville notices him turning his head. In a fit of rage, he quickly drives in Fred's direction, gets out of the car and starts shouting hysterically:

> Hey! Hey!
>
> What the hell are you doing out here, Fred?!
>
> What the...? What the hell are you...?
>
> No!
>
> No! No!
>
> No.
>
> What the hell are you doing out here, Fred?!
>
> How did you get out here?!
>
> Fred, if you're real, you better tell me right now!

Through imagination, the human subject can create a fanciful world of their own making. During the pretend play, Neville is at once the actor as well as the author of his imagination; in addition to its temporal unreality aspect, his imaginary world manifests itself as "spatial unreality" where the "rapport between the imaginary object and its background world is not one of contiguity or exteriority as in the real world, but one of 'magical interdependence' whereby a change in the object immediately implies a change in its imagined surrounding world." (Kearney 2003, 228). From this perspective, for Fred to be outside of the temporal and spatial unreality created by Neville means to Neville that his *imaginary world* no longer emanates from his consciousness: it is no

longer predictable and under his control, it becomes uncertain, unknown and uncontrolled, just like his *real reality*. His imaginary act trespassed into the real and imagination has become intertwined with his perception of reality. Under these circumstances, in Sartre's sense, Neville is no longer an "unreal character"[13] in his own imaginary act, but he unwillingly turns into a "real character" in an imaginary world not of his own creation where the negation of the *real* does not occur, as the *real* mingle with an *unreal* world. Consequently, the *real* Neville is stuck between two realities at the same time, two realities that escape his control by taking away from him the comfort blanket of his predictable imaginary world, leaving him a victim to a delusional imagination wherein the imaginary is encroached onto reality.

Perplexed, confused and scared, Neville shouts at Fred:

> Fred, if you're real, you better tell me right now!
>
> If you're real, you better tell me right now!
>
> *He shoots Fred*
>
> Damn it, Fred!
>
> Damn it!

As Fred keeps silent, in a spurt of anger Neville shoots him and he drops "dead." In the heat of the moment, he walks in Fred's direction to check on him, and he is captured (Fred's mannequin has been used by the Darkseekers as a trap). Neville's first experience of this delusional imagination tells us more about the nature of his imagination than about the limits of this latter. This delusional imagination was not an encounter with the fatality of imagination (when it enslaved its creator) as much as it was an encounter with the mutating form of Neville's imagination. This delusional episode marks Neville's first encounter with his creation, i.e. *second reality*. In *I Am Legend*, Neville is infatuated with a figment of his imagination that occurs repetitively in the record shop; he seem to be seeking something opposite to his reality, rather than instability, he seeks repetitiveness, rather than uncertainty he seeks predictability and rather than chaos he seeks a controlled order; he is seeking an *imaginary world* that negate the *real* in every possible way. His longing for the pre-apocalyptic reality and desire to go beyond his apocalyptic everyday reality has him creating a *second reality* that ensures him security, certainty and sanity without interfering with the *real reality*, a reality that may lack the external form of reality (as it belongs to the realm of the unreal) but which fills in the gaps left by the *former reality* (pre-outbreak).

In Voegelin's philosophy, the *second reality* is defined as "a self-blinded condition suffered by many [. . .] when they substitute manufactured images for perceptions of reality, the authentic reality that everyone experiences" (Jamieson 2004, 2).[14] In Neville's case, the emergence of this *second reality* does not substitute the current everyday reality, but it pacifically coexists with it in contrast to the *second reality* found in psychosis cases, wherein the individual is trapped in another reality and loses any touch with their real reality.[15] In Neville's case, he knows that this *second reality* is not real; it does not choke off the other aspects of his *real reality*. Quite the contrary, it is what keeps him from losing his mind and being overtaken by the gloominess of his lonely world. That is also what makes this *second reality* different from the one in pathological cases, where the person concerned loses touch with the *real reality* and

goes through a process of derealisation in which his *second reality* becomes his only reality. Thus, the awareness of its nature by the one experiencing it is what makes it stand oppositely to the second reality manifested in pathological cases.

On that account, Neville's act on the bridge is far from being delusional in a "pathological way," in the sense that Neville was deceived by his "perception" and not his "imagination"; he was well aware that perceiving Fred on the bridge was something rationally inconceivable since he is conscious of the "unreality" of Fred and the "reality" of his world. Keeping Neville's situation in mind, we may turn to Sigmund Freud's ideas on the realm of imagination, in which he posits the world of imagination of the *artist* in contrast to that of a *neurotic*[16] wherein the former, unlike the latter, "know[s] how to find a way back from it and once more to get a firm foothold in reality." (1971, 64–65).[17] Which is the case of Neville, who, throughout the narrative, has never given up on his goal of finding a cure: he has a firm foothold in his post-apocalyptic reality.

## Second reality: Between Nothingness and Temporality

In the narrative, the day Neville shoots Fred is also the day Sam dies. Upon his death, a wave of uncertainty invades Neville's life. Yet, I argue, it is not the death of his dog that breaks Neville, but rather what Sam represented. Sam was that which tied Neville to his former life, what reminded him of his motivation, and what sheltered him from the unbearable solitude. The next morning, Neville buries Sam before he heads to the record shop. This day, Fred is not there, and with heavy steps Neville enters the shop and shuffles towards the mysterious lady and with a sad voice he shyly says:

> I promised my friend...
>
> ...that I would say hello to you today.
>
> Hello.
>
> Hello.
>
> Please say hello to me.
>
> Please say hello to me

Picciuto and Carruthers (2016, 316) remark that "[i]maginings can be motivationally neutral, or they may motivate attractively or repulsively depending on our emotional response to them. What starts as just an imagining of oneself on a Caribbean beach may swiftly turn into a desire to be there." In light of this statement, there appears much desire as Neville's greeting remains unanswered, as he says, with eyes full of tears and a shaky voice: "Please say hello to me ... Please say hello to me." In this scene, Neville is willing to give up on the real and seek comfort in the arms of his *second reality*. The death of his dog has unveiled to him the meaningless of his hard work (his attempts to find the vaccine) when he no longer has anyone to share it with, the meaningless of his existence when he is left with just himself as a companion. At this point, he is ready to give up on his *real* but not on *reality*; thus, he goes on seeking the companionship of a shop dummy: he has a strong desire for her to greet him back. The pain felt by Neville in this scene shows us his despair but also his awareness of the "nothingness" of his imagination, which opposes the real objects existing in the real world (i.e. he is not delusional). In Sartre's words, "we seek in vain to create in ourselves the belief that the object really exists by means of our conduct towards it; we can pretend for a second but we cannot destroy the immediate awareness of its nothingness" (1965, 18).

Neville's awareness of the separating line between what he is experiencing and what he desires has him giving up on the second reality as well, and forces him to thrust back into his chaotic and bitter reality: deserted streets, empty shops, a lifeless city; a reality that can neither be accepted nor rejected. As a result of his loss of hope, he irrationally and suicidally embarks in an act of revenge against the Darkseekers. However, he is miraculously rescued by two other survivors, Anna and Ethan, who had come from Maryland to find him. This encounter has simultaneously marked the disappearance of the second reality narrative throughout the second half of the movie. The socialization that he so long sought through the realm of imagination has restored its legitimate place back into the realm of reality (thanks to Anna's and Ethan's presence); thus, the second reality no longer grants that which can be granted in real life. Its uselessness condemns it to discreetly disappear from Neville's life; under these circumstances he finds (anew) the motivation to pursue his research, finds the antidote and gives his life to defend it.[18]

**Conclusion**

In this paper I do not argue that imagination is inherently good or bad, a positive or negative coping mechanism. Such an evaluation depends on the space that imagination takes in our lives. After all, it is a coping mechanism that a person chooses consciously. However, I do emphasize that, in times of pandemic, aside from the virus or the behavioral patterns of people, everything is prone to mutate, and imagination is no exception. Neville's conditions are relatable in light of the COVID-19 outbreak. The film confronts us with a major social problem, that of isolation and the loneliness that stems from it. *I Am Legend*'s narrative shows us how far a human being may be willing to go to overcome such frightening feelings (even going so far as to give birth to a *second reality*).

Our imaginations have been running rampant since the outbreak of COVID-19: pretend play, whether in a group or alone (i.e., with imaginary friends), has boomed during the lockdown. Some people have been recreating their summer holidays or morning commutes (STV News; SWNS; Metro Newspaper UK 2020). A five-year-old girl in Texas celebrated her birthday with imaginary friends after her party was cancelled due to social distancing guidelines amid the pandemic (Schrader 2020). A Twitter video shows a three-year-old boy waving his hands and greeting imaginary people on the street (Edmunds 2020). Meanwhile, in Salt Lake City, Utah a two-year-old boy named Theo Brady has befriended a Halloween skeleton and named him "Benny" (Hartman 2020). Some celebrities have also found refuge and support through some imaginary episodes, such as Cristiano Ronaldo who "gave high-fives to imaginary fans," before Juventus played against Inter Milan behind closed doors due to the pandemic (Collins 2020). Quite recently, Khloé Kardashian, after 16 days in isolation, revealed that she had made an imaginary friend, Quarantina (made out of glasses and a neck pillow), that "saved" her during her quarantine (Ray 2020). This suggests that the strength of imagination can be sought episodically by some and permanently by others (Neville typifies the latter).

Interestingly enough, the pretend play that takes place offline in *I Am Legend*'s narrative, has become a phenomenon in our digitalized and technologically advanced reality in a completely unexpected and outlandish form called "Larping."[19] Facebook "pretend-to-be" groups such as "A group where we pretend to all be roommates," "a

group where we pretend its 2009–2012" or "a group where we all pretend that we live in the same house," sprung up less than a month after lockdown. These groups have thousands of active members posting every day.[20] Larping gives a sense of socialization but, more importantly, of predictability in a world ravaged by unpredictability under the threat of the invisible virus. People pretend to be middle-aged dads, Hispanic moms, drug addicts, bees, dogs, or even pretend to attend Greendale Community College. By repeatedly engaging in any of these imaginary acts, Larping—as a coping skill—gives place to a *second reality* that fills the gap of social interactivity left by the *former reality* (pre-outbreak).[21]

All things considered, we find that coping responses vary (pretend play, gaming, art, etc.).[22] We are enthralled by the imaginary of pretend play in the same way that we are enthralled by the imaginary world of books, movies or video games. Imagination is an action performed by consciousness and stems "solely from the intention that animates it" (Sartre 1965, 23), and these characteristics make up also the heart of its mutation, i.e. *second reality*. However, there are two main factors that distinguish the *second reality* from imagination: (1) The *repetitiveness* and *predictability* that characterize the second reality: it can be said that imagination mutates into a second reality when the human subject, intentionally and consciously, wants to be freed from the uncertainty of the real and taken into a predictable unreal world, stable, and most importantly under the control of its creator. If we keep Neville's example in mind, the predictability and repetitiveness within the unreal world come first over his desire for socialization; by contrast, when engaging in some "unpredictable" imaginary activities like gaming, watching a movie or reading a novel, predictability and repetitiveness come second, and this is what distinguishes the second reality from imagination. (2) The *temporality* of the second reality: second reality is manifest under stressful conditions and disappears with the disappearance of the latter. In Neville's example, his second reality disappears in parallel with the appearance of Anna and Ethan;[23] However, in a later scene Neville plays the song "stir it up" by Bob Marley to Annam which illustrate the persistence of imagination[24] as it is "impossible to conceive of a human consciousness which would not be 'imaginative'; for such a consciousness would no longer be human but a mere thing engulfed in the world" (Kearney 2003, 236).

The outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic is impossible to predict at the time of this writing, and so is the state of imagination, but one thing is certain: without imagination the human subject will be "run through by the real" (Sartre 1965, 272).

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**Notes:**

[1] In this context, the *real reality* stands for "perception" and the *second reality* for "imagination." It is important, at the beginning of this paper, to draw a separating line between imagination and perception. "Detailed phenomenological analysis shows that the image and the percept are not so much different objects of consciousness as different ways of being conscious of objects—i.e. the percept as a 'real' presentation of its object and the image as an 'unreal' one." (Kearney 2003, 226). While perception is limited by the way reality presents itself to consciousness (think of perception as "a text that is already writing itself, already partially defined, and made complete by the human touch of interpretation" [Steeves 2000, 140]), imagination, on the other hand, negates the limitation of the perceptual consciousness and create its own fanciful world.

[2] The first cholera pandemic (1817–1824), the second cholera pandemic (1826–1837), the third cholera pandemic (1852–1860) and the flu pandemic (1889–1890)

[3] "According to germ theory, the diseases are spread and caused by the presence and actions of specific microorganisms (known as pathogens or 'germs') within the body through many mediums such as water, food, and contact. This theory came in contradiction with the long adapted 'miasma theory' which stated that the bad air or miasma was the main cause of every disease." (Kannadan 2018, 42).

[4] This novel has inspired three very different movie adaptations: *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971) and *I Am Legend* (2007).

[5] In this context, "threats" means the situations in which we can be in physical danger, as well as those in which our mental health can be in danger too.

[6] For example, "losing your job would be an external demand. Something difficult or stressful has happened to you, and you find ways to cope with the challenges that losing your job brings. On the other hand, dealing with depression would be an internal demand. While there is no traumatic external event to deal with, you have to address the internal challenges presented by depression" (Ackerman 2020, par. 13).

[7] For further reading: Bone, Edith. *7 Years' Solitary*. London: H. Hamilton, 1957.

[8] It is important to note that Sartre (1695) limits the concept of "imagination" to being an antithesis to perception and a fanciful negation of this latter, in contrast to the broader interpretation drawn by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his work *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) from which James B. Steeves in his dissertation (2000) has distinguished four different functions of imagination. (1) Perceptual imagining: it is the "most basic contact of the body with the world and forms a medium through which meaning is established and discovered"; it "occurs on a level that is below and contains an irreducible background that I can never completely understand" [51]. Simply put, it is the image through which, or according to which we see the real world. (2) Aesthetic imagining: The image as a work of art; "this image serves as an image of the second order, a double of the image of perception. This double is not a simple copy of nature, as Plato suggested, but a re-enactment of the very genesis of perceptual images" [62]. It is the image through which the artist is able to externalize his perception of the world. (3) Fanciful imagining: similar to Sartre's theory of imagination in which the "image is an act of consciousness against the world" [67]; and (4) Elemental imagining: the uncontrollable character of imagination often found in pathological cases. In this paper, the focus will be on the "fanciful imagining."

[9] For further reading: Haight, W. L., Wang, X. L., Fung, H. H. T., Williams, K., & Mintz, J. "Universal, developmental, and variable aspects of young children's play: a cross-cultural comparison of pretending at home." *Child Development*, 1999, vol. *70* (6), p.1477–1488.

[10] Given the intentionality and authorship of the imaginary activity by its creator, it provides him with nothing that is new or unknown to him.

[11] In this context, different examples are presented to us by Sartre (1965) from which: (1) In "The Condemned of Altona" [1959], a play written by Sartre himself, the imagination enslavement is portrayed through the character of Franz, the elder son, who goes on negating "the present by obsessively reliving his past" [Kearney 2003, 234]. (2) The mythological King Midas, famously known for his ability to turn everything he touched into gold, represents another dark side of imagination which can, in this case, "degenerate into a form of self-fascination which knows no limits, no curbs to its own desire" [Kearney 2003, 231]. And, (3) the mythological king and sculptor Pygmalion who falls in love with his creation Galatea (a statue), which "epitomizes the absurd condition of the modern imagination in so far as it seeks to fulfil its desires by means of fictions projected by its own desires" wherein the human subject becomes the "initiator of his own enslavement" [Kearney 2003, 231].

[12] Darkseekers are those humans who were not killed by the Krippin virus, and mutated into savage, ferocious creatures that crave for living flesh, but still keep enough of their intelligence to set up traps.

[13] To elucidate, Sartre (1965) stresses this unrealness of the character in the realm of imagination through the actor's example. If we take, for instance, the character of Hamlet (from *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* play by William Shakespeare [1599-1601]), the actor who plays the role lives in an unreal way through this character, he becomes an imaginary personage that embodies the Prince of Denmark. In this sense, "[i]t is not the character who becomes real in the actor, it is the actor who becomes unreal in his character" (Sartre 2001, 296). In Neville's case, throughout the repetitive pretend play he embodies the *unreal* character of a man who picks up records and who is not skilled at approaching women, in contrast to his *real* virologist character that conducts experiments on rats and tries to save the world.

[14] For further reading: Embry, Charles R. *The Philosopher and the Storyteller: Eric Voegelin and Twentieth-Century Literature*. Vol. 1. University of Missouri Press, 2008.

[15] People with psychoses lose touch with reality, their "ability to distinguish between the internal experience of the mind and the external reality of the environment" is disrupted. The main psychotic symptoms are delusions and hallucinations (Lieberman and First, 270).

[16] According to Freud a neurosis represents "an instance where the ego's efforts to deal with its desires through repression, displacement, etc. fail: 'A person only falls ill of a neurosis if his ego has lost the capacity to allocate his libido in some way.' The failure of the ego and the increased insistence of the libido lead to symptoms that are as bad as or worse than the conflict they are designed to replace." (Felluga 2015, 192)

[17] Freud defines imagination as "a 'reservation' made during the painful transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle in order to provide a substitute for instinctual satisfactions which had to be given up in real life" (Freud, 64–65). Simply put, imagination is a shelter sought to carry the human subject from a denial to an acceptance of reality; in this context we could refer again to the play *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, which William Shakespeare had written after the death of his father as a re-enactment of this hurtful experience. Through this imaginary act (writing), Shakespeare temporarily distances himself from the disagreeable reality, before he finds his way back into the real reality. It is important to note that the imagining of Shakespeare was aesthetic imagining that allowed him to externalize his experience of the world through his words; even if it differs from Neville's fanciful imagining in regard to the form, they both can come to effect only by negating the *real world*.

[18] In this context, Sartre (1965) by re-using the example of Peter explains the disappearance of the image as follows: "I see Peter, and someone says: 'That's Peter'; I join the sign Peter to the perception Peter by a synthetic act. The meaning is fulfilled. The consciousness of the image is already full in its own way. Were Peter to appear in person the image would disappear." (Sartre 1965, 33). With this in mind, the appearance of Anna and Ethan along with the 'real act' of

socialization has brought along the disappearance of the "unreal act" of socialization of the *second reality*.

[19] Larping (or LARPing) is "short for 'Live Action Role-Playing.' A live action role-playing game is a form of role-playing game where the participants physically act out their characters' actions. The players pursue their characters' goals within a fictional setting represented by the real world, while interacting with one another in character. The outcome of player actions may be mediated by game rules, or determined by consensus between players" (Urban Dictionary). Larping traditionally takes place offline; however, under the growing virtualisation of people's lives and the proliferation of activities within the virtual world, Larping starts happening away from the physical reality, online.

[20] Anthony Lauxier, an administrator of "A group where we speak gibberish and pretend to understand each other," says "his group grew from around 5k to 50k in the span of a month after the lockdown and is now at 140k members"; and Adam Lee, who started "A group where people can pretend they are soccer moms" says "since the lockdown I've gotten twice as much content as well as 500 member requests a day" (Mathew 2020, par. 6).

[21] Ramirez, a "Larper" who lives alone, says that Larping and the resultant sense of community has helped her through the lockdown even though she says that "I have a fairly demanding job and my workload seems to have doubled since the lockdown began" (Mathew 2020, par. 10). The existence of this second reality does not obstruct the other aspects of Ramirez's real reality, rather it is what helps her keep her sanity and productivity amid these difficult times.

[22] Aside from Larping, in today's world people are using Netflix, Youtube, Spotify or Gaming as a coping mechanism to find the strength to carry on living in the *everyday reality*. With COVID-19 conditions keeping many indoors, "more people are playing than ever, with a 46% daily active users increase in HD gaming and 17% in mobile gaming" (Irpan et al 2020, 8). Spotify "saw its paid subscriber base surge to 130 million in the first quarter amid coronavirus lockdowns. The company saw usage on video game consoles such as Xbox and PlayStation soar during the period" (Pandey 2020). The viewership of Netflix has soared: in April, it reported "the addition of a record 15.77 million paid subscribers globally in the first quarter—double the new subscribers it expected—propelling its stock price more than 65% higher" (Owens 2020). As for the streaming service YouTube, the user numbers have grown by over 15% with key trends of topics such as "home workout content," "learning something new" or "Museum tours" (Hutchinson; Koeze; Youtube, 2020). At a time of global crisis, people turned to different forms of support to adapt, cope and find community.

[23] In her post-COVID-19 life, Ramirez does not expect she will be engaged as much with the online groups (Mathew 2020).

[24] In this regard, Kendall Walton argues that our "experiences of music seem shot through with imaginings" and Charles Nussbaum writes that "the listener constructs models of layouts and scenarios in virtual musical space in which he moves in imagination." (Young 2016, 200). For further reading see: Walton (1994); Nussbaum (2007).