

Apocalypses Now: Two Modes of Vulnerability in *Last Night* and *The Mist*

Fabián Orán Larena
Universidad de La Laguna
forallar@ull.edu.es



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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on Judith Butler's notions of vulnerability, precarity, and grievability to examine two filmic texts: the Canadian *Last Night* (Don McKellar, 1998) and the American *The Mist* (Frank Darabont, 2007). Both primary sources feature the apocalypse as their principal narrative and thematic concern—a trope virtually unexplored from the standpoint of the production of vulnerability and the bodily dimensions of political and ethical life. In the present contribution I conduct a close analysis of both films so as to identify and evaluate the significantly contrasting modes of vulnerability produced in these two narrations. I argue that these conflicting worldviews originate from the differentiated episodes of (de)valuation, legitimization, and recognition experienced by and in bodies in the face of the ultimate phenomenon of vulnerability: the apocalypse. My structuring argument is that *Last Night* complies with the notion of vulnerability as a locus of ethical cohabitation and affective engagement while constructing a heterogeneous sense of Canadianness. *The Mist*, on the other hand, deploys vulnerability as a discursive mechanism that causes individual and social bodies to be subjected to a range of violence-prone asymmetries and processes of dehumanization, rearticulating key rhetoric and imagery from American cultural history.

RESUMEN

Este artículo emplea los conceptos de Judith Butler de vulnerabilidad, precariedad y capacidad de ser llorado para analizar dos textos fílmicos: la canadiense *La Última Noche* (Don McKellar, 1998) y la estadounidense *La Niebla* (Frank Darabont, 2007). Ambas fuentes primarias tienen el apocalipsis como su principal elemento narrativo y temático (un símbolo prácticamente inexplorado desde la perspectiva de la producción de la vulnerabilidad y la dimensión corpórea de la vida ética y política). En este artículo llevo a cabo un análisis de ambas películas con el fin de identificar y evaluar los modelos altamente contrapuestos de vulnerabilidad producidos en estas dos narraciones. Considero que esas visiones antagónicas radican en los diferentes episodios de (no)valoración, legitimización y reconocimiento que experimentan los cuerpos al enfrentarse el fenómeno más definitorio de la vulnerabilidad: el apocalipsis. Mi tesis central es que *La Última Noche* se ajusta a la noción de vulnerabilidad como espacio para la convivencia ética y el entendimiento afectivo al tiempo que construye una visión heterogénea de lo canadiense. Por el contrario, *La Niebla* emplea la vulnerabilidad como un mecanismo discursivo conducente a toda una serie de asimetrías violentas y procesos de deshumanización, rearticulando así elementos e imagería claves en la historia cultural estadounidense.



Let's face it. We're undone by each other
(Butler, *Precarious Life* 23)

The apocalyptical has functioned as a fruitful and multifaceted trope in film history. It has been deployed to tackle an assortment of themes related to human engagement with natural environments, the structural shortcomings of our social contracts, and the various forms of violence that may arise from the realization that human life is bound to disappear (Krewani and Ritzenhoff xiv-xx)¹. Despite the vast number of stories and iconographies the apocalypse has come to produce, there is one thematic concern –lying at the core of the very notion of the end of the world– that does not feature prominently in apocalyptical films and their analyses, nor does it generally play a key role in these narrations other than displaying the carnage and bodily horrors typical of the subgenre. That missing element is the idea of human vulnerability.² Very few narrative formats seem better suited to examine human vulnerability than the apocalypse. It is a phenomenon that encapsulates the ultimate situation of vulnerability: the fragility and injurability of all existing bodies are unequivocally enhanced and exposed. And yet, accounts of the apocalypse have placed very little emphasis on how the prospect of human extinction may help us identify vulnerability as being constitutive of human sociality and conducive to ethical engagements and affective responses.³

Last Night (Don McKellar, 1998) and *The Mist* (Frank Darabont, 2007) embody two complementary filmic examples of apocalyptical narrations that can be gauged from the standpoint of vulnerability. The looming prospect of apocalypse forces the characters inhabiting both stories to react in significantly different modes in terms of ethical cohabitation. That is, in situations where protagonists' vulnerability is exacerbated and rendered palpable, these two films engender conflicting outcomes as to the way subjects approach their peers, gather together, and deal with the increasingly tangible vulnerability of their own bodies. In turn, a comparative analysis of both films not only reveals contrasting articulations

1 See sections three, four, and five in the comprehensive collection of essays *The Apocalypse in Film: Dystopias, Disasters, and Other Visions About the End of the World* edited by Krewani and Ritzenhoff.

2 It would be remiss not to mention, at least, two contemporary filmic ruminations on vulnerability and precarity against the backdrop of the (post)apocalypse: *Melancholia* (Lars Von Trier, 2011) and *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009).

3 Inquiries into the filmic apocalypse usually focus on more overt political and historical disclosures (see Blake 71-122 and McSweeney) as well as on the string of thematic concerns linked to the posthuman and the zombie film (see Moreman and Rushton).

in terms of human vulnerability, but also two diverging discourses on national identity, as I will later explore (*Last Night* is a Canadian production whereas *The Mist* is an American production). Darabont's horror rendition of the apocalypse is influenced by the harsh political antagonisms of the War on Terror. McKellar's film, on the other hand, can be seen as an unconventional account genre-wise, unaffected by the politics of the post-9/11 world, as well as a curious exploration of a certain sort of Canadianness –something accomplished by largely avoiding the ready-made tropes of apocalyptical films.

Judith Butler's texts on vulnerability and precarity provide a number of reading strategies to approach these two films. A key concept for contextualizing and examining *Last Night* and *The Mist* is the consideration of precarious life as a binding, unifying element. Butler suggests that "[t]o say that a life is precarious requires not only that a life be apprehended as a life, but also that precariousness be an aspect of what is apprehended in what is living." She continues, adding that "there ought to be recognition of precariousness as a shared condition of human life" (*Frames* 13). Therefore, to understand life as inherently precarious entails, primarily, an acknowledgment of all existence as being anchored in our very bodies, which are, first and foremost, injurable and exposed entities subject to and dependent on other bodies. One of Butler's most seminal and valid points is having underscored "the bodily conditions of life" ("Precarious Life" 147). The apocalypses portrayed in *Last Night* and *The Mist* can be thus analyzed in terms of whether social bonds are developed through a collective, unifying sense of precarity. Therefore, my reading much more thoroughly examines aspects such as the films' plots and character development than their purely visual and cinematic properties (although these elements do not go unaddressed in the analysis).

In addition, it needs to be pointed out that this ontology of the body is twofold. The vulnerable condition of the body implies a potential sense of belonging as well as the implicit danger of being hurt:

[B]odies are bound up with others through material needs, through touch, through language, through a set of relations without which we cannot survive. To have one's survival bound up in such a way is a constant risk of sociality –its promise and its threat. The very fact of being bound up with others establishes the possibility of being subjugated and exploited –though in no way does it determine what political form that will take. But it also establishes the possibility of being relieved of suffering, of knowing justice and even love. (Butler, *Frames* 61)

This dual perspective on the precarious body as a precondition of life can be observed in the stark differences between *Last Night* and *The Mist*. Although the nature of the apocalypse in both films is different (in McKellar's the apocalypse is announced while Darabont's characters face what appears to be a monster-infested invasion in a closed microcosm), in *Last Night* precarity paves the way for fraternity and empathy whereas in *The Mist* the discourse of vulnerability is (mis)used to provoke and legitimize polarizing violence.

Likewise, Butler's questioning of the ontology of individualism in favor of a generalized condition of precariousness (*Frames* 33) presupposes or argues for a sort of heterogeneous, collective self—somewhat retheorizing the decentering of the subject introduced by a number of post-Enlightenment readings on the identity construction of the self (see Hall 274-326).⁴ Butler opines that “to say that we have ‘needs’ is thus to say that who we ‘are’ involves an invariable and reiterated struggle of dependency and separation [...]. It is not just ‘one’s own’ struggle or the apparent struggle of ‘another’ but precisely the dehiscence at the basis of the ‘we,’ the condition under which we are passionately bound together: ragefully, desirously, murderously, lovingly” (*Frames* 183). The alleged impossibility of dislodging the “I” from the “we” also offers a fundamental interpretative framework for analyzing the discourses of the two films under scrutiny.

Last Night scans a net of interrelated characters as the city of Toronto awaits the apocalypse to be unleashed at the end of the day. The film pivots on four main characters during their last day on earth: Patrick (a cynical and introspective widower), Sandra (a woman searching for her husband, Duncan, with whom she has agreed to commit suicide right before the world ends), and Craig (a man trying to fulfil all his sexual wishes before the apocalypse arrives). Occasional outbursts of gang violence and rioting disturb a population that, for the most part, has accepted the apocalypse in an oddly casual manner. Much as certain moments of crisis and anxiety do take place, the protagonists and the supporting characters we see onscreen seem moderately well-adjusted to the idea that human life is about to be extinguished. The Saramagoesque tone and storyline of the film—neither the audience nor the characters are informed of why the world is coming to an end—help narrativize a set of human portraits fundamentally connected with cohabitation and the mobilization of affects. McKellar's film sees shared precarity as the binding principle among the protagonists.

4 In her book *Precarious Life* (22), Butler describes the loss of a loved one as an illustration of how the “self” is inextricably interwoven with other people through emotional ties. It follows that no individuality can be formed, perpetuated or understood without reference to a net of surrounding affective bonds.

Patrick (arguably the protagonist of the story) embodies affective engagement as a means to reconnect with the world and to acknowledge precarity as life's inherent trait. Deeply traumatized by his wife's death, he is completely isolated from his peers until Sandra appears in his life. Prior to meeting her, he attends a family reunion in which he displays all his cynicism and emotional distance towards his relatives. During the reunion, Patrick's father comments on the inevitability of death (the apocalypse being just a few hours ahead), bringing in Butler's reflection on precarity:

PATRICK'S BROTHER-IN-LAW: And we're all gonna die anyway, so...

PATRICK'S FATHER: It gives us all the more reason to be civil. Now more than ever, we should be courteous, respect each other's needs. It's a test of our values. (min. 13)

Patrick's father puts forth that a moment of enhanced and palpable vulnerability heightens the links among individuals and should not be thought of as moment to let loose carelessness or indifference. In fact, this exchange foreshadows Patrick's own progression as a character: he himself will move from emotional distance (all the more conspicuous in the earlier steps of the film) to reconnecting with the world by accepting vulnerability as an emotional link.

Later on, Patrick runs into Sandra on the street. After reluctantly assisting her to find her car, an empathic relationship arises that enables Patrick to work through his inability and unwillingness to accept human cohabitation:

PATRICK: Even when you're with someone else, you're still by yourself and I don't think that's pathetic, I don't think that's sad. [...] But what I do find sad and what I do find pathetic, is people who don't know themselves, or people who don't like themselves and as soon as they hear that the world is ending, they rush out and try and hook up with someone [...]

SANDRA: There's something to be said for human companionship. (mins. 35-36)

Here Patrick is arguing for an explicitly anti-Butlerian line of thought whereby individuation is enshrined and positioned as the main identitary element. The collective is therefore downgraded and thought of as a shallow urge to mitigate one's vacuity. Patrick negates the affective responses and ethical associations implicit in human interaction: “To be impinged upon by another” argues Butler “assumes a bodily proximity, and if it is the ‘face’ that acts upon us, then we are to some extent affected and claimed by that ‘face’ at

the same time” (“Precarious Life” 139). For most of the film, Patrick will remain anchored in a Cartesian assumption of himself, disregarding the importance of socially and affectively constructed ties in articulating individual identity and autonomy. As the conversation with Sandra reveals, Patrick views cohabitation as a meaningless social construct that does not contribute to identity formation.

Sandra plays a pivotal role in reshaping Patrick’s worldview. Newly married and recently pregnant, her search for her husband Duncan (who is eventually killed in a random outburst of street violence) helps Patrick reengage with the bodily dimensions of life. This shift can be observed in a moving and critical sequence during the last act of the film. As Patrick and Sandra exchange personal anecdotes and information, Patrick discloses that his wife passed away:

SANDRA: Tell me your big tragedy.

PATRICK: My tragedy...

SANDRA: About the girl you loved who ran away or died.

PATRICK: She died.

SANDRA: It’s pretty obvious. But people die all over. You have to put it into perspective. Soon, we all will.

PATRICK: Uh... it’s hard...it’s hard for me to explain this. You’d have to meet my family. But, well, she taught me how I could love. How much. Which is a lot, actually. Surprising. You’d never believe it. Someone like me. But, you know, actually...It’s embarrassing for me to tell you this...but, um...she... she died, and then they said the world would end. (min. 80-81)

From that dialogue onwards, a Butlerian epiphany starts affecting Patrick’s moral compass. If precarity involves conceptualizing life as a bodily reality and vulnerability as the condition of being exposed to the world, Patrick’s re-engagement with loss (i.e. his wife’s death) is, precisely, a reminder of the injurability and precariousness of life (in this case with an emphasis on death’s inevitability and randomness). What is more, the fact that Patrick brings back the memory of his wife does not further isolate him from the world. The very opposite occurs. His wife’s demise functions as a binding, rehumanizing element. It is through the acknowledgement of the vulnerable condition of life that Patrick finally incorporates himself into social cohabitation. Patrick’s reconnection to the social fabric after embracing the vulnerable, affective condition of life exemplifies Butler’s idea that “responsiveness –and thus, ultimately, responsibility– is located in the affective responses to a sustaining and impinging world” (*Frames* 34).



Figure 1: Suicide scene



Figure 2: Patrick and Sandra kiss each other

The very last stages of the narration sublimate the Butlerian discourse that permeates the film. Sandra convinces Patrick to commit suicide by shooting each other right before the Earth collapses. However, they are unable to pull the trigger. This climactic moment (Fig.1 and Fig.2) enacts almost literally some of Butler’s points. The scene can even be understood as a filmic dramatization of the following lines:

To find that one’s life is also the life of others, even as this life is distinct and must be distinct, means that one’s boundary is at once a limit and a site of adjacency, a mode of spatial and temporal nearness and even boundedness. Moreover, the bounded and living appearance of the body is the condition of being exposed to the other, exposed to solicitation, seduction, passion, injury, exposed in ways that sustain us but also in ways that can destroy us. In this sense the exposure of the body points to its precariousness. (“Precarious Life” 141)

In this sequence, human vulnerability is materialized in the most extreme manner. The guns and the approaching apocalypse embody the vulnerable conditions of both Patrick and Sandra, their bodies being totally exposed to destruction and violence. Here the film visually articulates that “[p]recariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some way in the hand of the other” (*Frames* 14). The film manages to show human cohabitation and precarity by having both protagonists literally put their lives in each other’s hands. Once they have unequivocally perceived the shared vulnerability of their existence (they are, after all, on the brink of committing suicide), they embrace, cry together, and kiss. Thus, not only does the film narrativize precarity and vulnerability by means of the failed suicide, but it also foregrounds the resulting affective response and the human engagement that arise from such common, binding reality.

The film comes to an end with a slow-paced montage sequence that brings together all the characters in their very last moments on Earth (mins. 88-91). Just as in the sequence previously analyzed, the film underscores a sense of shared vulnerability among all the characters—something enabled and enhanced by the use of editing. By uniting every single relevant character in the story right before they die, the film portrays them in a similar situation of total vulnerability, their bodies equally exposed to destruction and showcasing a similar situation of fragile humanity. That notion of cohabitation through vulnerability is further heightened by the fact that, in actuality, we get to see all characters “together” through the montage sequence, erasing the “thereness” of their bodies. Therefore, the ending deploys one of the most basic properties of film language (the use of editing to form one semiotic unit out of many others) to articulate Butler’s point about the “thereness” of bodies, and how vulnerability can transcend our individual bodies in order to create a broader sense of sociality and cohabitation. The final sequence, by merging all narrative strands while the apocalypse begins, materializes Butler’s thesis of “the body as the site of a common human vulnerability” (*Precarious Life* 44).

The Mist narrativizes the apocalypse along different lines than *Last Night*. Not only does Darabont’s film tap into vulnerability in a harsher, more violent fashion, it also provides us with usages of vulnerability that are completely absent in McKellar’s understated and humanistic apocalypse. *The Mist* is not merely a darker counterpart to *The Last Night* but, rather, a formulation of some of Butler’s notions that brings to the fore the potentially destructive dimensions of vulnerability and precarity.

After a terrible storm hits a little town in Maine, a large number of people crowd a local grocery store to get supplies. A mist starts surrounding the entire town and a band of people gets trapped in the store. They will remain there for a few days, succumbing to mayhem and horror as the mist unleashes blood-thirsty creatures that repeatedly besiege and penetrate the store, terrorizing and killing some of the customers. In this context of shock, two groups are formed inside the store: on the one hand, Mrs. Carmody commands a creeping majority preaching that these supernatural horrific events foreordain the apocalypse, on the other a sort of “enlightened” group stands together, composed of decent and sensible people reluctant to participate in Mrs. Carmody’s delusions. While the former consists of characters stereotypically presented as weak-minded and yokel, the latter is made up not only by the protagonist and the main supporting characters but by those who hold “intellectual” status in society—the charismatic leader, David, is a painter, there are two teachers, and the remaining ones (blue-collar and civilians) show lucidity and calmness in facing supernatural horrors. The disparity between the two groups (one coarse, paranoid, and violence-prone; the other

cool, reflexive, and pragmatic) is founded both on their contrasting worldviews and practices and on the way they both interact with the social environment generated within the store.

The formation of strong social bodies to alleviate or contest the hardships wrought by violent contextual forces reflect some ideas already described in *Last Night*. Like the protagonists of McKellar’s film, the characters in *The Mist* also seek to survive and cohabit only after having violently realized that there is a shared sense of precarity among them all that can be minimized through sociality, in other words, through social interaction and empathy.

This sense of sociality is represented visually and narratively at several points during the first act of the film. Right before the mist covers the whole town, a long take and a series of brief sequences run through the store showing the main characters interacting and making small talk (mins. 8-10). At that moment, there is not a social body instituted as such nor do characters seem to have relational bonds beyond the superficial. When a group, led by the rational urbanite lawyer Brent, decides to abandon the store they are stopped by the crowd (min. 48). Still unwilling to accept the supernatural nature of the mist, Brent’s group remains unconvinced despite social pressure to stay inside the store:

DAVID: Why don’t we just sit down and just...

BRENT: What, and let you keep on talking? No, I’ve been in far too many courtrooms to fall for that. You’ve already psyched out half a dozen of my people already.

AMANDA: Your people? What kind of talk is that? They’re people, that’s all. (min. 49).

As one of the two teachers in David’s group, Amanda’s words disclose a sense of Butlerian vulnerability that aims at defining security and human belonging as a form of cohabitation, of a collective sense of solidarity and ethical compromise. The film will later reveal the characters’ willingness to harm and act violently upon each other. However, the first stages of the film highlight the fact that, when threatened (in this case by a Lovecraftian apocalypse), the groups formed inside the store resort to gregarious links, which only reinforces the notion that “the ‘being’ of the body [...] is one that is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations” (*Frames* 2). In other words, human bodies need to be incorporated within broader structures that may preserve them in some form.

The sequences from *The Mist* analyzed thus far illustrate how the representation of vulnerability in *Last Night* and in Darabont’s film bears some relation: in the wake of apocalypse, a social and ethical sense of cohabitation is either constituted or cemented to a

greater extent. However, *The Mist* gradually introduces a number of discursive elements that set the film apart in comparison with its Canadian counterpart –these differentiating elements are all tied to the notion of grievability. Grievability does not operate in *Last Night* but it is potently narrativized in *The Mist* as episodes of gruesome violence and social breakdown start to dominate the story.

Grievability does not just refer to the act of mourning over a loss but, rather, to the conditions that shape social reality so that a certain group of people is perceived as worthy of empathy, affection, and attachment. “[G]rievability is,” therefore, “a presupposition for the life that matters” (Butler, *Frames* 14). Whether grievability is granted to a specific social body is determined by an array of cultural and political factors that render certain populations livable, visible and well-represented, while others can be largely marginalized, occluded, underrepresented, and thus, more easily disregarded or subjected to violence. “The differential distribution of grievability across populations” writes Butler, “has implications for why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss, and indifference” (*Frames* 24). The villain (the religious bigot Mrs. Carmody) taps precisely into this question. Butler comments “that affect is structured by interpretative schemes that we do not fully understand” (*Frames* 41). In the film, Mrs. Carmody produces interpretive schemes that do channel and regulate very visibly the social affects within the store.

Throughout the film, Mrs. Carmody lays out her Biblical reading of the events, announcing carnage and death. Incidentally, she is not attacked by the creatures when the store, just as she had foreseen, gets viciously raided by the monsters. Her linking of the supernatural events with an Armageddon-like process is, in the first instance, repudiated but it is gradually accepted and endorsed by certain people. After one particularly horrifying attack, one person at the store voices incipient support for Mrs. Carmody’s hitherto deranged eschatological harangues: “She was right. She said that it would happen like this. She said that they would come at night. She told us someone would die” (min. 63). Mrs. Carmody ends up commanding the entire social body because she is the one character in the story that manipulates and reconfigures those “interpretative frames” that signify and project one specific social body as more disposable than others. She manages to convince almost all the people trapped in the store to kill one of the characters in a lynching-like fashion (min. 93). To put it in Gramscian terms, Mrs. Carmody is the only political operator who supplies the terrorized people of the supermarket with rationales and reada-

⁵ I am cursorily making reference to the Gramscian concepts of hegemony and common sense (see Gramsci 158-168, 175-184; and Salamini).

bility for the horrific events.⁵ When she utilizes familiar Christian imageries and symbols to indoctrinate her fellow citizens, she is providing them with certainties and moorings through which they might make sense of their experiences and find grounding and orientation. In so doing, she is also projecting one section of the population (the group rallied behind the protagonist David) as non-grievable, as not entirely worthy of human recognition. In this respect, *The Mist* dramatically departs from *Last Night*. In McKellar’s film, there is no questioning of whether certain characters or social groups are to be seen as unworthy of human recognition. In fact, the apocalypse in the Canadian film functions as an equalizing phenomenon that levels off all characters on the grounds of vulnerability. In *The Mist*, grievability does play a critical role: it is the discursive mechanism that enables forms of community-sanctioned aggression to be instituted and rationalized.

The way Mrs. Carmody acts upon reality so as to dehumanize the adversary is, nonetheless, underpinned by the notion of vulnerability. The figure of Mrs. Carmody helps us illustrate that “the discourse of vulnerability can support any version of politics” (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2). Vulnerability can be utilized as means of ensuring and preserving hegemonies of oppression; it can represent a strategic claim to naturalize and legitimize violence against groups or peoples who have been othered:

When vulnerability is projected onto another, it seems as if the first subject is fully divested of vulnerability, having expelled it externally onto the other. When vulnerability is owned as an exclusive predicate of one subject and invulnerability attributed to another, a different kind of disavowal takes place. Indeed, asymmetry and disavowal work together. Such strategies can work either way: “others” may be exposed to vulnerability as a way of shoring up power, but vulnerability can also be claimed by those who seek to rationalize the subjugation of minorities. (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 4)

Mrs. Carmody epitomizes that reversal of vulnerability by making use of it so as to reinstate a form of violence against those characters opposed to her Old Testament reading of the apocalypse. In fact, her usage of vulnerability draws on certain rhetorical modes typical of the most extremist fringes of contemporary American conservatism. There are striking similarities between one of Mrs. Carmody’s final speeches in the film and Moral Majority icon Jerry Falwell’s comments two days after 9/11 when he blamed the terrorist attacks on sexual and civil liberties and women’s reproductive rights:

MRS. CARMODY: Don’t you know the truth? We are being punished. For what? For going against the will of God! For going against his forbidden rules

of old! Walking on the moon! Yes! Yes! Or, or splitting his atoms! Amen! Or, or, or stem cells and abortions! And destroying the secrets of life that only God above has any right to! Amen! Amen! Yes, I know! It is true! And now we are being punished. The judgment is being brought down upon us. (min. 92)

Compare this to Falwell's argument:

Throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools, the abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked and when we destroy forty million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], People for the American Way, all of them who try to secularize America: I point the thing in their face and say you helped this [the 9/11 attacks] happen. (*The 700 Club*)

Both statements are similarly founded upon the assumption that fundamental values are being threatened by scientific and social change. But most importantly, both Mrs. Carmody's rhetoric and Falwell's famous post-9/11 rant express a sense of being under attack as well as a self-image of vulnerability. The two speeches endorse that there has been punishment and suffering wrought on the community because traditional values (religion, heterosexuality, women's role as mothers) have been eroded or destroyed.⁶ Here we can observe vulnerability not being understood as an inherent characteristic of life itself, facilitating cohabitation, affective engagement, and moral cohesion. It is employed as a tool to dismantle the legitimacy of certain claims (be them cultural, sexual, or political).⁷

While the apocalypse does occur in *Last Night*, in the *The Mist* the world does not come to an end. However, Darabont's film ends with an extraordinarily somber and tragic sequence where David is forced to kill four of his peers (including his son) moments before

⁶ Mrs. Carmody's radicalism resembles that of a variety of Christian groups and activists linked to conservatism since the 1980s, which have interpreted Biblical imagery in the same apocalyptic and violent fashion. These religious groups have become active political actors in the United States over the past four decades (Heineman) whereas Canadian political culture is not nearly as influenced by these forms of religious activism.

⁷ In this sense, vulnerability plays an important role in shaping central categories of political discourse. As post-Marxist political theorists have argued, key notions such as liberty, equality, democracy or justice can be subject to profound political resignifications (Laclau and Mouffe 174). In the same way vulnerability can be mobilized in order to question normative structures of power or to strengthen a politics of moral divisiveness and marginalization (Bracke 52-65).

the mist recedes and reveals that the monsters have been exterminated by the army. The climax of *The Mist* emphasizes the ethical breakdown that takes place when, within a community, social bodies coexist in asymmetrical levels of grievability and human worthiness. Unlike *Last Night*, where vulnerability is readily accepted, violence and death ultimately appear in *The Mist* because its characters understand social interaction as being based on the notion of "whose life is grievable and worth protecting and whose life is ungrievable, or marginally or episodically grievable and so, in that sense, already lost in part or in whole, and thus less worthy of protection and sustenance" (Butler, "Precarious Life" 148).

The two versions of the apocalypse that dominate both stories not only reveal two alternative conceptions of vulnerability, rather, two well-differentiated national backgrounds are also disclosed, influencing the way the two films portray and characterize the end of the world. While Darabont's story is informed by the most violent (both symbolic and material) lines of American culture, McKellar's explores the heterogeneity and lack of totalizing narratives typically associated with the Canadian identity.

Mrs. Carmody's speeches in *The Mist* draw on the rhetoric of Puritan and Protestant traditions and literatures. The "utopian orientation" of Americanism that often results in moralistic attitudes (Lipset 63) can be seen, albeit in a grotesquely exacerbated manner, in Mrs. Carmody's claims to cleanse and purify her community. Similarly, the messianic tone that permeates her message—whereby her actions are God-mandated and, thus, inherently legitimate—resembles the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny expansionism and its conception of the American nation as being tantamount to "Moses leading his people to what by divine fiat was already theirs" (Bercovitch xx). In many ways, Mrs. Carmody's discourse functions as the "sermon-narrative" of Puritan texts, which were meant to unify, depersonalize, and indoctrinate populations around a cohesive set of institutionalized norms sanctioned by the polity (Slotkin 66). Mrs. Carmody's discourse taps into violence-ridden mythologies of the American tradition as well as into cultural narratives related to the God-given nature of the American nation.

A different national construct is displayed in *Last Night*. As has already been noted, McKellar's film features a set of characters that, for the most part, have accepted the apocalypse in an uncannily natural manner. Unlike *The Mist*, the thrust of the story is neither the construction of community nor the way utopianism and violence may erode the social fabric. *Last Night* explores a number of explicitly less monolithic cultural narratives.⁸ The-

⁸ Here it is worth mentioning another Canadian film, *Pontypool* (Bruce McDonald, 2009). Like *Last Night*, it is a film which approaches and explores sci-fi and/or horror tropes (in this case the zombie infection) by neglecting or largely reusing the conventions of the genre.

se could be summarized in the understanding of the Canadian identity as “an obstinate challenge to Manifest Destiny” (Keith 15). Throughout the film there is no overarching line of discourse attempting to violently merge all characters into one identity strand. When compared to *The Mist*, *Last Night* represents the extent to which “Canada is a nation that has resisted the more American model of unification” (Hutcheon 28). This is inscribed right down to the very last gesture and detail in each aspect of the film: an extremely diverse host of characters, a mosaic-like narrative structure, a refusal to prototypically depict the apocalypse as mere mayhem and chaos, and an overall sense of narrative and thematic heterogeneity that makes it impossible to categorize the film along typical genre lines or filmic categories. In some ways *Last Night* narrativizes what in the context of Canadian literary postmodernisms was once defined as “the total ambiguity that is so essentially Canadian” (Kroetsch and Bessai 208).

What this paper has sought to address is how the notions of vulnerability and grievability may engender interpretative mechanisms and reading practices that map out films and their imaginaries in a different light. The apocalyptic film is a subgenre that facilitates a type of analysis focused on material destruction and enhanced bodily fragility –two thematic concerns that lend themselves to examination through Butler’s reflection on affective and ethical frames. Thus, apocalyptic film serves as one particularly appropriate format for interrogating how the formation of ethical ties (or lack thereof) among social groups may be conceived as struggles for human recognition, for being acknowledged as a subject worthy of empathy. In this sense, *Last Night* and *The Mist* offer two highly contrasting models in terms of the production of vulnerability and grievability. Through the critical framework supplied by Butler’s *Frames of War*, *Precarious Life*, and “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation”, both films reveal a conflicting array of ethical disclosures and political worldviews, as well as two antagonistic formulations of national identity. Ultimately, what both films show is that the horrors and uncertainties unleashed by the apocalypse can be assessed thematically, morally, and politically by taking into account whether or not the vulnerable condition of human life is understood as the key value for cohabitation and living as a community.

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