

CHAPTER TWO

“WHY SHOULD IT BE US WHO DIE FOR YOU?”: DYSTOPIAN REPRODUCTION IN *THE GIRL WITH ALL THE GIFTS*

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1. Introduction

Colm McCarthy's 2016 film *The Girl with All the Gifts* begins with the audio of a girl's voice counting up from the number one. A shouting male voice interrupts her with a number of phrases, from commands of “transit,” “wakey, wakey,” and “rise and shine” to insults towards the children as “friggin’ abortions.”¹ As the light rises, we see the counting girl, Melanie (Sennia Nanua), in a cell, and she seats herself in a wheelchair. Soldiers enter the cell and proceed to strap Melanie into the chair at gunpoint. The soldiers roll Melanie down a concrete hallway and into a roomful of other similarly seated and strapped children. The soldiers leave through the only door, and a woman subsequently enters, taking a position at the front of the room and beginning a rigid and rote chemistry lesson about the periodic table.

Set in a military complex, the opening scene establishes some of the crucial themes for the film. The “transit” of the children represents how people move through their daily lives from one context to another, from prisoner to pupil. The commands to “rise and shine” show the habitual nature of our schedules, often measured down to the minute. While being told to “rise and shine,” the children are paradoxically dis-abled, confined to wheelchairs, and prevented from getting up. The harsh insult “friggin’ abortion” amplifies the dystopian tenor of the film. The term *abortion*

¹ *The Girl with All the Gifts*, directed by Colm McCarthy (2016; Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2017), DVD.

often carries connotations of termination, extraction, and waste, yet these children clearly appear alive and sentient. The hardened routine of military precision and imprisonment contrasts the usual associations of childhood with innocence and freedom. The movement of the children from a cell to a classroom demonstrates the conditioning and indoctrination children experience during their upbringing in modern industrial countries, a scene reminiscent of *Pink Floyd: The Wall* (1982).² Despite the freedoms associated with liberal democratic states, many of those freedoms emerged from and are sustained by firm ideological commitments to routine, normalcy, and the status quo. A primary function of the dystopian genre is to destabilize, to challenge, or to invert these underlying structures.

As the chemistry lesson indicates, *The Girl with All the Gifts* is concerned with science, with the periodic table, the elements, the molecules, and the building blocks of matter, organisms, and life. Generically, it is both a zombie film and a science fiction film. While its box office appeal may be its fast zombies that are similar to those in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002),³ the film's ethical and political critiques stem from its treatment of women in relation to reproduction, scientific advancement, and social institutions. Chemistry represents the objective, scientific understanding of life; motherhood and reproduction invoke the political debates around control of human reproductive technologies and choices. Having three women as the primary characters, the film shows how the male-dominated social institutions, like the military and the sciences, curtail the power and possibilities for women as actors both inside and outside social institutions. As the reference to "abortion" indicates, two primary concerns are reproduction and motherhood, yet the film examines other female experiences such as childhood, sexual awakening, marriage, career, and aging. Despite the dystopian genre of the film, the *Gifts* of the title suggests a utopian hope for the future, one informed by female agency. The film's ending aims to regain individual autonomy over women's bodies, reproductive choices, and intellectual development. However, while the ending may project a gynocentric utopian future, it fails to address issues of class and race, particularly as they relate to economies of value associated with immigrant, racial, and marginal figures in the film.

² *Pink Floyd: The Wall*, directed by Alan Parker (1982; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2005), DVD.

³ *28 Days Later*, directed by Danny Boyle, (2002; London: DNA Films, 2003), DVD.

2. Opening Pandora's Box

Based on M. R. Carey's 2014 novel of the same name,⁴ *The Girl with all the Gifts* is set in a dystopian future in Britain after the Breakdown, a biological fungal event that infected almost all humans and turned them into zombies. The humans label the zombies "hungries" due to their practice of attacking and biting human flesh to spread the infection. The fungus invades the human host and takes over the body's main systems, using the host as a surrogate to incubate its own spores and causing the host to remain static unless provoked by smell or sound. Stationed at a military base, the survivors of the plague hope to develop a cure for the infection. There are three main types of survivors. First, military personnel, led by Sargent Eddie Parks (Paddy Considine), represent the hierarchical structures of destroyed humanity. Parks attempts to maintain order in a world that no longer appears to recognize his authority or methods. Second, specialized civilian contractors work to find a cure for the infection. These include Dr. Caroline Caldwell (Glenn Close), a late-career research scientist, who believes that invasive research on infected hosts will yield a cure. Helen Justineau (Gemma Arterton) is also on staff, as a teacher for the hungry children. Third, the hungry children, such as Melanie, are human-zombie hybrids who survived the Breakdown because they were prenatal children during the outbreak. In other words, the hungry children were born of human mothers, but their *in utero* state protected them from the most negative effects of the fungal infection. The children appear normal, even gifted as Melanie demonstrates, but scientists like Caldwell believe that the infection is merely mimicking human behaviours and intelligence. Caldwell insists the children are mere plant matter for scientific experimentation and discovery, while Justineau maintains they are special children deserving of conventional human rights. Parks appears not to care either way and simply wishes to survive. The debate over the sentient, autonomous, and arguably human status of the hungry children is a central ethical question for the film.

After the first few scenes, the military base is overrun by hungries, and a small band of survivors—including Parks, Caldwell, Justineau, and Melanie—flees into the uncertain territories of an infected and hostile Britain with the hope of reaching the home base they call Beacon. Their travels take them from the rural countryside into the centre of London where they encounter a dense population of hungries as well as other hungry children similar to Melanie. London is overrun by fungal vegetation,

⁴ M. R. Carey, *The Girl with All the Gifts*, (New York: Orbit, 2014).

and Caldwell notes that the spores are maturing and ready to release an airborne mutation of the infection under the right conditions, one that will infect every surviving human. Upon discovering an abandoned mobile research station and realizing the time limits of their survival, Caldwell attempts to undertake a final but ultimately thwarted experiment on Melanie, while the airborne fungus is released in high concentration from the BT Tower in London, thereby killing all remaining humans. The only survivors are the hungry children who are immune to the airborne fungus, as well as Justineau who survives in the mobile lab. The movie ends with her maintaining her role as teacher to lead the hungry children into a new era of human evolution, with Melanie functioning as a teacher's aide. In the aftermath of the destruction of humanity and its patriarchal institutions, a woman remains to usher in a new era of learning, community, and progress.

The novel's concern with science is informed by a longer history dating back to Greek antiquity. The chemistry lesson ends with the entrance of Helen Justineau, a name that invokes both Helen of Troy and the ideal of justice. During the transition of teachers, Justineau tells the chemistry teacher that they have not yet covered the periodic table, yet the other teacher responds that it is just a technical drill of memorization and pairing and that "[c]ontent is not really relevant, is it?"⁵ The children request story time as a replacement for chemistry, and Melanie suggests Greek myths since "then it counts as history."⁶ Justineau agrees to read the story of "Pandora, she who brings gifts,"⁷ revealing the film's primary intertext and source of the title. While common knowledge holds that Pandora's Box let loose the evils upon the world, the myth also includes one gift that remains in the box to be subsequently released: it is hope. The film follows the myth's structure by moving from dystopian evil to utopian hope.

The chemistry teacher's disregard for content reveals the privileging of quantitative over qualitative learning in the school system. In terms of story, a quantitative approach would suggest that it does not really matter which story were told, just that a story, any story, be told. However, Melanie's preference for Greek myth and her realization that myth and history are mutually informing disciplines demonstrate the importance and necessity of qualitative learning. Rather than seeing various school subjects as discrete specializations, Melanie reveals her gift of interdisciplinary understanding, an ability to synthesize information as a

⁵ *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

higher-order intellectual function. Like her status as a human-hungry hybrid, her knowledge is not limited to a single category. Like the myth of Pandora's box, she sees not only the evils that escape from the box but also the hope that remains in the box as the yet-unopened gift, the utopian seed in the otherwise dystopian world.

Similar to the Biblical story of Eve, the Pandora myth has a woman as the bringer of evils into the world. Justin Glenn comments on this similarity and further suggests that the two myths "signify not so much man's suspicion of woman but rather society's suspicion of sex."⁸ Glenn's argument broadens the focus from the gendered subject to include the sexual act, for both its intimate relationship and its procreative possibilities. Together, these possibilities raise the social anxieties about our familiarity or intimacy with the female reproductive subject. The rigidly hierarchical world of the film questions how institutions can control, manage, and direct the reproductive gifts of the female body. The justification for such control is the purported protection of the world from evil: if women are not controlled, then sexuality and reproduction are not controlled, and evil will proliferate.

3. The Female Leads

The film has three main female characters, representing different ages and political positions in the film, which allows the film to explore the multiple compromises, successes, and transitions for female subjectivity within the various institutional settings of the film. The different traits of the each female character—age, race, education, institutional function, and sexual desirability—reveal the competing values that circulate within and between institutions and subjects in the film's dystopian world. For example, the film contrasts an older, white, educated, and objective female scientist with a young, black, orphaned, and outcast child to reveal the power differentials between their respective political positions.

The eldest female figure is Dr. Caroline Caldwell, an aging scientific researcher who has compromised her personal ethics in favour of institutional ends. Like Parks, she has convinced herself that the hungry children are not human. At times, she acts as a strict mentor to Justineau, yet Justineau rebukes her advice, and the two clash over the treatment of Melanie. Wielding a fire extinguisher as a blunt weapon, Justineau confronts Caldwell during the first attempted dissection of Melanie, stating

⁸ Justin Glenn, "Pandora and Eve: Sex as the Root of All Evil," *The Classical World* 71, no. 3, (Nov. 1977): 179.

"[y]ou're cutting up children."⁹ Caldwell responds, "[t]his is an argument I've had with myself a thousand times. But, I'm listening [to you]."¹⁰ Caldwell convinces Justineau to negotiate verbally and to put down her weapon. Upon Justineau's compliance, Caldwell betrays Justineau by spraying her with mace. Caldwell comments, "[w]hat you are feeling, I respect it, but I can't afford it."¹¹ Caldwell values her research above all else. Even her diction demonstrates a privileging of economic and utilitarian ends over emotional or ethical ends, affordability over feelings. Despite having an understanding of the ethical debate about her research, Caldwell is resolute in her decision. She is unwilling to re-open the debate, even though she feigns willingness to do so for Justineau's sake.

The film ironizes Caldwell's position. As she assesses Melanie's human characteristics, Caldwell gives her logic problems. Early on, she poses the problem of Schrodinger's Cat to Melanie. In the laboratory, Caldwell asks for Melanie's response: "It's not alive or dead. It's just gone," adding "Cats are clever."¹² Caldwell corrects Melanie by saying, "The standard answer is, it's both. Alive and dead, at the same time" to which Melanie responds, "That's stupid."¹³ The most obvious irony is that Melanie, as a hungry, is both alive and dead, yet Caldwell is unable to grant her a contradictory status similar to Schrodinger's cat. Moreover, Caldwell's reliance on the "standard answer" reinforces her adherence to conventional, accepted knowledge. Later in the film, Melanie finds and eats a cat while exploring London, devouring the scientific objective of Caldwell's logic problem.

Caldwell's faith in institutional knowledge reveals a second irony: she is unable to see Melanie's creativity. Melanie produces an answer that attempts to explain the contradiction: the cat has escaped, even if we do not understand how. In further stating that the cat is "clever," Melanie is perhaps referring to Homer's Odysseus who is known for his cunning, a story Miss Justineau has read to the children. While Caldwell may see this response as merely mimicking the content of a Homeric tale, it can equally demonstrate Melanie's ability to understand the function of storytelling and to apply it to new contexts and situations. Melanie, like the myths she has been told, is adaptive and creative. Furthermore, the problem of Schrodinger's Cat is dialectically similar to Pandora's Box. Both boxes produce contradictions: life and death for one; good and evil for the other.

⁹ *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Only partially blinded by her adherence to the established rules of medical science and laboratory procedures, Caldwell acknowledges that she is making a comparison between the cat and Melanie, but her methods remain invasive and destructive to Melanie. She merely wants to open the box to reveal its contents rather than contemplate the larger problem of human knowledge and experience. For Caldwell, Melanie represents the hope for a cure for humanity: kill the evil to produce the cure. For Melanie, Caldwell represents the evils of physical harm and death: Melanie hopes to live. By reducing Melanie to a fungal mass undergoing set procedures, Caldwell embodies some of the worst elements of human science.

Helen Justineau acts as a humanist foil to Caldwell's clinical methods. Believing that the hungry children are autonomous agents, Justineau encourages the students to write their own stories in the classroom, to be creative. When Melanie reads her story about a beautiful woman who is attacked by a monster but saved by a hungry girl, Justineau is moved to tears, believing in Melanie's humanity, friendship, and desires. As with Caldwell, the film also ironizes Justineau's stereotype as the affective teacher. When walking past Melanie's cell late at night, Justineau sees that Melanie has been left confined to her wheelchair rather than freed to use her bed. Justineau enters the cell in order to rescue Melanie, but Melanie smells Justineau's scent and turns into the monster that desires human flesh. The film re-writes Melanie's classroom story not as one where the hungry child saves the beautiful woman from the monster but as one where the hungry child is the monster who threatens the woman. Melanie makes this point to Justineau later, after they have escaped from the fallen military base. Justineau says that Melanie saved her, yet Melanie corrects her by saying she did terrible things by eating and killing the soldiers who threatened Justineau. Their different interpretations of the event reveal the ambiguities associated with storytelling and myths: both the soldiers and Melanie are threatening and protective. The film shows the limitations of the affective pedagogical approach and of storytelling. It may work well in lessons, but it may have different consequences in real life. Like Schrodinger's Cat, it may be both. By illustrating the insufficiencies of Caldwell's and Justineau's approaches, the film hopes to resolve the contradiction between objective and affective knowledge in the figure of Melanie.

Melanie embodies the contradictory nature of the film. Even the novel begins with a fundamental opposition in Melanie: "Her name is Melanie. It means 'the black girl', from an ancient Greek word, but her skin is

actually very fair so she thinks maybe it's not such a good name for her."¹⁴ While the novel describes Melanie as fair and blonde, the film casts a black actor as Melanie, thereby introducing race into the monstrous figure of Melanie. When read alongside the reproductive and maternal themes of the film, Melanie's blackness invokes questions about the status and reproduction of non-white citizens and non-white immigrants within Britain. If Caldwell represents a conservative female relationship with institutional power and Justineau represents a conflicted maternal and teacherly figure, Melanie represents the nascent, innocent figure of the child, particularly the racialized child. That is, as a human-hungry hybrid, Melanie is both a part of and apart from humanity, in a similar way that non-white children and non-white immigrants are both integrated and excluded from the British status quo. Representing a new breed of person, Melanie experiences the multiple ways that dominant institutions—military, educational, political, scientific—exercise control over the intellectual and physical realities of subjects who are disempowered through their racial, youthful, gendered, or sexual status. The dystopian tenor of the film captures the invasive paranoia about the external abject subject attacking a stable, white Britain: Melanie threatens the future of Britain. The utopian ending of the film imagines an inclusive future with new kinds of social institutions and new kinds of subjects, albeit not without their own potential problems: Justineau will guide Melanie and her kind as they forge their own futures.

Notably, none of the female figures in the film is attached, romantically or otherwise, to any male figures, thereby setting up a potentially gynocentric utopian vision. In fact, the most persistent form of desire in the film is arguably homoerotic. Melanie's classroom story is about herself and Miss Justineau living happily-ever-after in a fairy tale world. When Justineau caringly touches Melanie's hair, Parks violently interrupts the scene and separates the teacher from the hungries, denying any form of relationship other than the institutionally sanctioned one. Parks removes Melanie and returns her to her cell, and Melanie confronts him: "She likes me best. She touched me. She wouldn't ever touch you."¹⁵ Here, Melanie is the originating source of desire. Neither Caldwell's nor Justineau's characters demonstrates any romantic impulses. Caldwell is aging and beyond her reproductive years, and the reproductive imperative of the dystopian world denies her any kind of sexual or romantic feelings. Justineau's sexual agency is supplanted by an example of the standard

¹⁴ M. R. Carey, *The Girl with All the Gifts*, 1.

¹⁵ *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

male gaze that objectifies females: when two soldiers are monitoring the classroom environment through the window in the door, one soldier says to the other about Justineau, “She’s well fit, though, isn’t she?”¹⁶ They joke how they don’t understand how Justineau can stand to be so close to those “creepy little fuckers,”¹⁷ thereby denying any alternative forms of human relationship. The soldiers only understand objectifying heterosexual desire. Justineau’s own sexual desires are arguably limited by her experiences within a misogynistic military environment.

4. Reproduction and Motherhood

As they travel into London, the surviving group takes refuge in a maternity hospital. When they are alone together, Caldwell tells Melanie about the grisly origin of the term “friggin’ abortion.” She says that Parks and other soldiers used to comb the city for supplies, and, on one occasion, they found the hungry babies. As Caldwell explains, the children were infected *in utero*, and the resulting human-hungry hybrid neonates ate their ways out of their mothers’ wombs, devouring the organs from the inside. The matricidal and cannibalistic children are a significant threat to the conventional reproductive order, both literally and figuratively. In answer to Melanie’s question of what she is, Caldwell states, “We don’t really have a term for it.”¹⁸ They are essentially a new development in human evolution, something simultaneously human and monstrous. Melanie, as a black child, represents a set of reproductive and racial fears grounded in institutional politics in Britain.

Cecily Jones details some of the contemporary problems with reproductive politics in Britain, focusing particularly on black mothers. Regarding the racial accusations about the perpetrators of the 2011 riots in Britain, Jones states that “[t]he pernicious political and media scapegoating of African Caribbean mothers and their ‘feral’ children displaced attention from other probable contributory factors – ever-increasing ossification of public services, jobs and social mobility in a society deeply riven with race and class inequality.”¹⁹ Jones identifies the contradictory discourse around black mothers: it constructs “them as hyperfecund bodies, yet deficient in the nurturing maternal qualities required to raise healthy, moral progeny.”²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Cecily Jones, “‘Human weeds, not fit to breed?’: African Caribbean Women and Reproductive Disparities in Britain,” *Critical Public Health* 23, no. 1 (2013): 50.

²⁰ Ibid.

On this analysis, many of the social ills of Britain originate from the reproductive capabilities of black mothers and the moral turpitude of their offspring: the opening of Pandora's Box. In other words, as a black child, Melanie was born to one of the "hyperfecund" black mothers, yet she is abandoned or orphaned to the care of general state welfare.

Parks' early mission was to round up these "feral" children—black or otherwise—in order to study and control the reproductive process of the fungal infection. Considered products of a biological disease, the children become entrenched in a system that begins to treat them also as a social disease: unwanted, orphaned, disabled, poor, and scientifically and sociologically interesting. Melanie represents a triple threat to the dominant, white system. First, she is a black, motherless child that will potentially reproduce other black, motherless children. Second, she is intelligent, which Caldwell can only explain through the fungal infection because she cannot conceptualize how a feral black child could be intelligent. Third, she desires Miss Justineau in several ways. Jones argues that "[w]hite middle-class women represent the embodiment of ideal motherhood,"²¹ and Justineau has the potential to occupy just such an ideal for Melanie. Yet, Justineau's relationship to Melanie is also multiple. Melanie admires Justineau as a teacher, which is hardly unusual. Yet, her fraught position as a teacher requires her to reproduce institutional rhetoric that keeps students like Melanie oppressed, despite her best efforts to resist these structures. Melanie also reveres Justineau as a savior figure. Justineau tells Parks, "She looks at me like I'm Jesus."²² The teacher and savior figure may well coalesce in a motherly figure, where Justineau is exactly the ideal mother that Jones describes. However, Justineau is unmarried, and Melanie's blackness implies an adoptive relationship, where the black child requires and consumes the resources of the unwed, childless, white mother. Like the human-hungry hybrid she is, Melanie feeds off Justineau to the detriment of the dominant social order, just as the presumably discarded children of disadvantaged families feed off the welfare state. Finally, Melanie demonstrates a subtle erotic desire for Justineau, as she earlier demonstrated to Parks. She competes with the military male affection for the available white woman through a romantic relationship that is predominantly conceived of as deviant.

As the group makes its way through London, Caldwell is fascinated by a hungry woman pushing a baby carriage. She approaches the zombie woman and stalls the carriage with her foot. In a tense scene, she draws

²¹ Jones, *op. cit.*, 52.

²² *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

back the baby blanket to reveal a hideous, hissing shape, which startles Caldwell and awakens the surrounding hungries. In the film, it is difficult to discern what occupies the carriage, but the novel reveals that it is a nest of rats.²³ Not only does this suggest that hungry babies are vermin to be eradicated, but also the novel includes a reference to rats when Melanie subdues her wishes to challenge Parks for the affections of Justineau: “she has to swallow all those feelings back into herself the way a rat or a rabbit will sometimes reabsorb into its womb a litter of young that it can’t safely give birth to.”²⁴ The novel configures Melanie as a mother who should not give birth to her feelings. Scientifically, a pregnant rat can reabsorb its fetuses if resources like food are scarce during the period of pregnancy. Sociologically, this scene implies that poor black mothers should also avoid childbirth through sexual abstention, abortion, or other birth control methods. Yet, the metaphor reduces Melanie and other black women to vermin and suggests a biological process of fetal resorption that is largely impossible for humans. Put bluntly, poor and racialized people should not reproduce or even desire to reproduce.

As Jones points out, “reproduction is structured across social and cultural boundaries, empowering privileged women (typically white, western, middle class) and disempowering less privileged (typically black and ‘other’ non-white and/or poor women globally).”²⁵ It is important that Caldwell notices the hungry mother. As a childless woman, Caldwell has likely chosen a career over family, coerced by institutional structures to choose one role over another. Her fascination stems from the instinctive motherhood in the hungry. It is a biological urge that the hungry cannot control, but an urge that Caldwell, herself, has controlled, overcome, or suppressed. Like her repressed ethical unease around dissecting hungry children, Caldwell has made a choice. Yet, her position as a white woman embedded comfortably in the structures of power enables her to have the right to choose, however compromised that choice may be. The implicit comparison between Caldwell’s choice not to have children and the hungry mother’s inability to resist her instinct of motherhood demonstrates a moral fortitude and superiority of the white woman who is able to control her female instincts and desires. Caldwell resists motherhood to serve the higher moral purpose of scientific advancement. The hungry mother is a slave to her instinct. Caldwell treats Melanie as she would the hungry mother, and Melanie has had almost no choice whatsoever. She

²³ Carey, *op. cit.*, 182.

²⁴ Carey, *op. cit.*, 79.

²⁵ Jones, *op. cit.*, 56.

has been collected like a biological sample to be subjected to invasive and fatal experimentation. She is not a mother, not a child, not a person. She is denied the reproductive opportunity to create a life through childbirth, much less live a life of her own.

When Caldwell explains to Melanie her desire to create a vaccine, she says, "It's the whole focus of my research. Nothing matters more. I want to save people, Melanie. I want to save everybody."²⁶ In the process of saving "everybody," Caldwell must paradoxically sacrifice Melanie. This scene in the maternity ward is interspersed with scenes of Justineau checking the rest of the building for hungries. As Caldwell is explaining her research to Melanie, Justineau finds a hungry and shoots it at the same moment when Caldwell says she wants to save everybody, implying that Melanie is "nobody" and implicating Justineau in the process of eradicating the hungries. In an ironic way, Melanie has been indirectly positioned as "nobody," the very term Odysseus applies to himself when he outsmarts Polyphemus who threatens to eat him. As Caldwell attempts to consume Melanie during her experiment, Melanie potentially assumes the role of cunning hero and will subsequently escape.

After Parks and Justineau have cleared the hospital of hungries and are sharing a bottle of brandy, Justineau asks Parks if he has "ever killed a kid."²⁷ Parks appears to interpret this as a hostile question, thinking that Justineau believes him to be a ruthless soldier without scruples. However, after Parks explains he was "in the Terries [the Territorial Army]" before the Breakdown and is hardly a hardened combat veteran, Justineau claims that she "is not a good person."²⁸ The concern for child welfare may refer to Justineau's relationship to Melanie. Yet, the novel reveals a backstory to Justineau, in which she ran over a child with her car after a night of moderate drinking at a party, just as she is now sharing a drink with Parks. Calculating the death, Justineau laments, "If you turn my life into an equation, the number that comes out is minus one."²⁹ She regrets the loss of life, yet, given her relationship with Melanie, she is also aware of her potential role of reproductive mother, if only as a surrogate. She tells Parks, "I will die my own self before I let you take me down to minus two."³⁰ Justineau's body count includes only children, not herself. She has assumed the role of self-sacrificing mother, and her relationship with Melanie is partially driven out of guilt for killing the other child. Justineau

²⁶ *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Carey, *op. cit.*, 222.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

wishes her life to be balanced back to zero by saving Melanie. Perhaps denied biological motherhood due to the apocalyptic conditions of the Breakdown, Justineau finds surrogate motherhood in her relationship with Melanie.

The film frequently complicates these false gender binaries. In one of the final scenes of the film, Parks is out looking for Melanie as the airborne spores are released, and he reveals to Melanie that his wife was pregnant at the time of the Breakdown. Using a domestic image, he says, "The last time I ever saw her, she was seven months. She was big as a house."³¹ This reveals that Parks' military mission that found the hungry children was likely also a personal mission to find his own child, for him to avoid becoming a "minus one" by losing his own child. He hopes that his pregnant wife may have given birth in the early times of the Breakdown. Ironically, if that were the case, his child would be a human-hungry hybrid like Melanie. In a humanizing moment, Parks transforms from the hard-wired soldier to the bereaved father-to-be, in an act of self-sacrifice to find Melanie in order to help Justineau avoid becoming a "minus two."

5. Stem Cell Research

Caldwell's plans to dissect Melanie invoke significant issues in the history of medical sciences. As a white doctor, she assumes the position of authority in relation to Melanie, yet Caldwell also has the power to utilize Melanie's own body to develop a vaccine for the fungal infection. Rebecca Skloot's popular *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010) speaks to similar problems in the history of stem cell research in the 20th-century. Skloot chronicles the story of how African-American Henrietta Lacks' cervical cancer cells (HeLa cells) were harvested and cultured for study towards scientific advancements in cell research. It also chronicles the emotional, social, and cultural costs of such research to individuals, families, and communities. Such cases indicate the difficulty in predicting the unforeseen ethical consequences of any scientific endeavour, particularly around the social factors associated with research like race, gender, and informed consent. As Skloot points out, "[b]lack scientists and technicians, many of them women, used cells from a black woman to help save the lives of millions of Americans, most of them white," adding that this happened at the same time and places as the "infamous Tuskegee

³¹ *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

syphilis studies.”³² Melanie’s life is reduced to a simple, but controversial utilitarian logic problem: is it justifiable to sacrifice Melanie in order to save millions of others?

Regarding the broader scope of stem cell research in relation to women’s health generally, Julie Kent asks, “How might we understand the exchange relationships between those women undergoing an abortion, the clinicians who procure the tissue and the users of the tissue, the SC [stem cell] scientists?”³³ Kent’s primary focus is on fetal tissue, but her argument and analysis can apply to most kinds of human cell research. A key ethical component of her argument concerns the discourse and ethics surrounding human tissue experiments and the original sources of the tissue. That is, fetal tissue may come from abortions or from differently ethically charged situations like “in vitro fertilisation (IVF)”³⁴ or other medical procedures. Kent argues that while donated biological materials may be used for exactly the same procedures, the source of the biological materials often creates social and ethical contradictions. For example, Kent’s research indicates that women undergoing abortions are often associated with a negative social stigma and usually want the procedure completed quickly with little ethical consideration of the potential harvesting of the aborted fetal material. Contrasting this, patients of IVF treatment often have surplus fetal material from the procedure and usually are more willing to consider and to donate the material for scientific research. As Skloot did with the Lacks’ case with cancer tissue, Kent notes the ethical problem with fetal tissue: “There has been no national oversight of research using fetal tissue and, outside the scientific community, little is known about the numbers of fetuses collected or their value to stem cell science.”³⁵ With its concerns of motherhood, reproduction, and race, *The Girl with All the Gifts* examines the contradictions between scientific research and social justice through the treatment of Melanie.

In the final exchange between Caldwell and Melanie, Melanie poses perhaps the most pointed question in the film: “Then why should it be us who die for you?”³⁶ Essentially, Melanie is asking Caldwell to justify her actions, to justify killing the human-hungry hybrids in order to save the human race. As a representative of the scientific and military institutions,

³² Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, (London: Pan, 2011), 112.

³³ Julie Kent, “The Fetal Tissue Economy: From the Abortion Clinic to the Stem Cell Laboratory,” *Social Science & Medicine* 67, (2008): 1747.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Kent, *op. cit.*, 1754.

³⁶ *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

Caldwell sees the value in sacrificing Melanie for the greater good of saving humanity, even after she admits that she believes Melanie to be “alive.” Termed a “friggin’ abortion,” Melanie is discursively constituted as unwanted waste and expendable. Yet, her hybrid human-hungry status complicates her ontological value as both disease and cure, as both sacrificed and saved. Moreover, her pre-pubescent state as an ostensibly human child gives monstrous presence to the forgotten residue of the aborted fetal tissue. That is, Melanie is the abortion that remained alive and grew up. She represents the potential that was lost in the abortive procedure. She *is* what *would have been*. Moreover, her act of eating her way out of her mother’s womb gives the potential abortion the will and the ability to choose life over death. In short, she is the hope, yet she is a monstrous hope. And, she is nearing the age of sexual reproduction herself. She is a network of contradictions, not the least of which is the abortion that will now potentially reproduce. The morality of Melanie cannot be categorized within the simple division of good and evil.

Kent uses the term “fetal tissue economy”³⁷ to demonstrate the competing interests around the circulation of fetal tissue. For example, she cites how The Abortion Act 1967 permitted abortion (loss of potential life) if there were risk to the mother (saving of life or health) in Britain.³⁸ Similarly, she cites how regular tissue donors must give informed consent for scientific research on the tissue, yet the case of aborted fetal tissue differed because the scientific and ethical communities thought that informed consent for scientific research “might influence [the women’s] decision to terminate the pregnancy.”³⁹ Thus, while the tissue may be inert and passive, the origins, contexts, and future uses of the tissue remain highly variable and contentious. Given that Caldwell believes Melanie to be mere plant matter, consent is not an issue, informed or otherwise. Even at the end of the film, when Caldwell admits she believes Melanie is alive, she does not think informed consent is necessary. For Caldwell, the end justifies the means, however she chooses to rationalize the oversimplified decision-making process.

In the final scenes of the film, fire triggers the release of the airborne fungus. The BT Tower has one of the highest concentrations of seed pods, and it serves as phallic symbol and ground zero of infection as the world order undergoes change. Fire both destroys and cleanses, and London is consumed in flame. The change illuminates the contradictory positions of

³⁷ Kent, *op. cit.*, 1747.

³⁸ Kent, *op. cit.*, 1748.

³⁹ Kent, *op. cit.*, 1749.

most of the characters. For Caldwell, she demonstrates how her commitment to scientific research continues to dominate her evolving humanist understanding of Melanie. For Justineau, she is initially cast as a maternal, pedagogical, and erotic figure for Melanie, yet Justineau's own commitment to Melanie stems partially, if not wholly, from a desire to compensate for a traumatic loss for which she was responsible. For Parks, he discovered Melanie during a search for his own child, and he finds her in the final moments of the film in service of Justineau's interests. His feelings for her are ambivalent, yet Melanie certainly serves as a surrogate child for his own loss. When Melanie encounters Parks as London burns, Parks remarks that the world has ended now that Melanie has released the airborne pathogen. Melanie responds, "It's not over. It's just not yours anymore."⁴⁰ Freed from being the test subject and emotional receptacle for other people's needs, Melanie has finally broken from an older humanity and has moved into a new, autonomous phase of existence. She answers her own question of "why should it be us who die for you" by reversing the scenario and killing off humanity in order for her and her kind to live. After fulfilling Parks' request to shoot him as he turned into a hungry, Melanie eulogizes him with a single word: "transit." Transforming the language of the military control over Melanie's body earlier in the film, she now uses the same term "transit" in a return to Greek mythology by giving it a Stygian context as Parks' spirit moves into the afterlife.

6. Conclusion

The mobile research station that the group discovers in London has the name "Rosalind Franklin" stenciled on the side. Franklin (1920-1958) was a pioneer in the discovery of the structure of human DNA. This detail gestures to gender in the history of scientific research. While Franklin was recognized for some of her work during her life, many other female scientists and female subjects go unrecognized and unrecorded in the history of science. Skloot's work on Henrietta Lacks is just one effort to attempt to redress these historical lacunae. Inside the station, a picture of the former crew has a caption: "Mushroom hunters do it in the dark."⁴¹ While the sexual joke is obvious, there are several further ironic references.

First, given that the Breakdown was a fungal infection, it is humorous that the researchers charged with finding a potential cure consider

⁴⁰ *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

themselves mushroom hunters. Caldwell is essentially a mushroom hunter to Melanie. Second, the sexual joke refers to the film's concerns with reproductive biology and motherhood. Third, the reference to "the dark" gestures beyond the low lighting levels to both the lack of knowledge around reproductive ethics and Melanie's racial status. Echoing the title of Toni Morrison's 1992 study *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*,⁴² the caption indicates how not only scientists but also many other producers of knowledge have worked on marginalized persons without clear ethical guidelines on sensitive areas of research.

For these reasons, the end of the film compromises its utopian vision. In their ecocritical and psychoanalytical analysis of the novel *The Girl with All the Gifts*, Ruzbeh Babaei, Sue Yen Lee, and Siamak Babaei claim that "Miss Justineau embraces the dawn of this new world with open arms because she views this change as a form of cleansing and consenting to the natural order of the environment."⁴³ The "dawn of the new world," however, does not necessarily lead out of the dark. While it is clear that the London fire has cleansed the world of patriarchal structures, the remaining structure consists of a white woman teaching a new generation of human-hungry hybrid children. While this may constitute a female utopian vision, it does not address the racial dynamics of the film's ending, nor does it represent some ideal condition or "natural order of the environment." Indeed, this is a familiar critique of many early feminists as primarily white and middle-class, which ultimately led to more diverse feminist theories engaged in intersectionality.

The end of the film reveals the persistent barrier between Justineau and Melanie, between the white and the black. The penultimate scene demonstrates that the sealed barrier of the mobile lab remains between the two females, despite their desire to inhabit the same space. The final scene begins with Melanie taping a picture of a cat to the lab's sealed window, affirming her living status as Schrodinger's cat. The film closes by showing Justineau within the mobile lab in the role of teacher. Justineau remains within the remnants of a destroyed humanity, as a form of both prison and protection. Like the military base at the beginning of the film, Justineau's existence is embedded within the traces of toppled hierarchical institutions, unable to escape her past. Melanie, as the teacher's aide,

⁴² Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁴³ Ruzbeh Babaei, Sue Yen Lee, and Siamak Babaei. "Ecocritical Survival through Psychological Defense Mechanisms in M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*," *Journal of Science Fiction* 1, no. 2, (2016): n.p. Accessed September 21, 2017. <https://publish.lib.umd.edu/scifi/issue/view/24>.

renews her request for stories, which Justineau defers to later time. Melanie responds, "There will be lots of time,"⁴⁴ a statement that invokes her willingness to hear Justineau's stories as well as a time beyond Justineau's existence, a time when Melanie and the other surviving children will author their own stories. The ending appears to maintain this barrier between the old and new generations, a condition where the new is awaiting the final extinction of the old. It is not a vision of harmonious integration but of inevitable separation.

Nevertheless, the film mounts a consistent critique of the ambiguous and difficult ethical questions regarding the exchange economies of research practices and social institutions. True to the dialectical nature of Pandora's Box, the film critiques the evils of scientific and humanistic treatments of marginalized figures while it simultaneously identifies potential and conditional hope for the future. The remaining racial tensions at the end of the film represent not a failure to resolve the contradictions but rather a hope that the moral questions facing the scientific and human communities do not yet need to be consigned to the flames. While the dystopian genre shocks its audience with a radical break from historical processes through apocalyptic visions, dystopian films and texts retain and interrogate the very contradictions they hope to surmount. *The Girl with All the Gifts* draws together the histories of feminist theory and the scientific method to reveal their shared concerns with ethics in terms of procedures, subjects, and visions of future developments.

⁴⁴ *The Girl with All the Gifts*.