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“Antiheroes in the Rubble: Exploring the Possibility of Heroism in Dystopias from *Watchmen* to *The Last of Us*”

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Abstract

In contemporary popular culture, we see a growing number of both antiheroic characters and dystopias in which society as we know it has ceased to exist. Antiheroes are not necessarily placed in dystopian narratives, but the combination of antihero-dystopias is significant. The dystopia forces us to adopt a new moral compass, one which does not allow a superficial dichotomy of good versus evil. Camus' philosophical ideas, particularly those articulated in *The Rebel*, are vital to understanding the controversial morality of the dystopic narrative. If society collapses and there is nothing left to save, what role does the hero have? Is it possible to be a hero in a condemned world? The answers to these questions will be addressed in relation to three media fictions: *V for Vendetta*, *Watchmen*, and *The Last of Us*. This article explores the possibility that the only possible heroism inside a dystopian narrative is antiheroic.

Keywords: dystopia, antihero, hero, catastrophe, rebel

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Antiheroes in the Rubble

*Exploring the Possibility of Heroism
in Dystopias from Watchmen to The Last of Us*

WHAT do *V for Vendetta*'s fascist dictatorship, the US on the verge of a nuclear conflict in the graphic novel *Watchmen*, and the zombie apocalypse in *The Last of Us* videogames have in common? They are dystopias, even if of a different kind, catastrophic realities in which society as we know it ceases to exist. They capture the common characteristics of a dystopian world and analyse the hero's role in these kinds of reality – if we can still talk about heroes,¹ of course. In fact, the characters created by Alan Moore (writer of the graphic novels *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen*) and Neil Druckmann (writer and director of *The Last of Us*) have strong heroic qualities, but they are also forced to take decisions and actions that we would define as evil in a normal situation. On his first appearance, V kills three men and bombs the Houses of Parliament – but he does so to save the young Evey and rebel against a powerful dictatorship. Joel and Ellie are incredibly courageous, and they are ready to sacrifice their own lives to save each other – but they are also ready to kill mercilessly and even resort to torture if that means saving their loved ones and themselves. In *The Last of Us 1*, Joel's purpose in protecting Ellie also coincides with a typical heroic mission to save humanity because Ellie is the key to finding a cure to the zombie virus; however, in the end, the two missions clash with one another, and saving humanity would result in Ellie's death. Typical of the antiheroic narrative, both universes make us face impossible moral choices.

In contemporary popular culture, we see a growing number and success of antiheroic characters. Antiheroes are not necessarily placed

¹In this article, the words "hero" and "antihero" are genderless. They do not refer only to male characters, but also, for example, to female heroines and antiheroines.

in dystopian narratives, but the combination of antihero-dystopias is significant in movies (*Mad Max: Fury Road*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Purge*) and especially TV series (*Black Mirror*, *The Walking Dead*, *3%*) – as well as graphic novels and games (*BioShock*). Not all antiheroes live in dystopias, but we could argue that the only possible heroism inside a dystopian narrative is necessarily antiheroic. For this article, three media fictions – two (super)heroic genre milestones and a videogame series which received universal acclaim – were considered: *V for Vendetta*, *Watchmen*, and *The Last of Us*.

Moore's graphic novels are two of the best examples of (super)hero deconstruction. Inside the dystopian worlds created by Moore, the heroic figures become more complex and ambiguous than a standard hero topos. The complex and multifaced realities in which they act do not allow a naïve good–evil dichotomy. Through Moore's works, it is possible to deconstruct the concept of "hero" and the role of heroism within a dystopia. Marco Arnaudo writes, "In a world on the verge of collapse, scenes of endless conflicts, massacres, genocides, threatened by ecological catastrophes with apocalyptic consequences, superheroes ... [represent] a gross lie" (2010, 182). Is Arnaudo right? If society collapsed and there were nothing left to save, what role would the hero have? Is it possible to be a hero in a condemned world?

These questions will be addressed in relation to the post-apocalyptic world of *The Last of Us*. Inside Joel and Ellie's America, the player is forced to take immoral actions to survive and continue the game. The enemies encountered are not only the infected – zombie-like creatures whose killing does not raise any moral issue since they are already dead – but men and women who, like Joel and Ellie, are also fighting for survival and whose methods and actions are (with the exception of the cannibal in *The Last of Us 1* and the slavers in *The Last of Us 2*) similar to the ones adopted by the player. However, to what end do Joel and Ellie fight if there is nothing left to save?

In order to survive a dystopia, players are forced to adopt a new moral compass and be confronted with different and extreme worldviews. How long can we stare into the abyss without becoming monsters ourselves? Which actions can be justified to save humanity? Where can we trace a line between justice and revenge? These questions will guide this analysis, which draws on philosophical ideas such as those articulated in the work of Albert Camus. In his work, and particularly in *The Rebel*, Camus addresses Nietzschean nihilist

thought, trying to find a new meaning and a new possible morality – based on the human being and not on religion or metaphysics – following the destruction of the metaphysical concepts of “Good” and “Truth”. In the idea of rebellion, understood as not only a destructive but also a creative force, Camus identifies the possibility of surviving the nihilistic destruction of a metaphysical sense of the world.

The loss of meaning is tightly linked to the antiheroic narrative. By questioning the heroic model, antiheroes consequently question the values and the society represented by that model. As Victor Brombert writes in his book *In Praise of Anti-Heroes*:

In an age of skepticism and dwindling faith, an age marked by the pervasive awareness of loss and disarray, the deliberate subversion of the heroic tradition may betray an urge to salvage or reinvent meaning. (1999, 6)

The philosophies of Nietzsche and Camus deal with the situation described by Brombert; thus, they are particularly helpful for analysing antiheroic and dystopian narratives. The two philosophers confront nihilistic disenchantment and the destruction of the traditional sources of meaning in human life, such as religion, ethics, or faith in progress. However, both do not stop at the awareness of a fundamentally chaotic and irrational reality. On the contrary, they try to fight against the ontological absurdity revealed by their philosophies and find a way to survive by reinventing a new meaning.

According to Camus, by rebelling, human beings can create and impose meaning in a world otherwise senseless: “I rebel – therefore we exist” (1992, 15). However, rebellion is not free from ambiguities and paradoxes; the rebellion described by Camus is necessarily paradoxical, just as the antihero is. As Brombert states: “The words paradox and antihero are wedded” (1999, 58).

It is essential to remember the connection between a dystopian narrative and our world in analysing a dystopia. “It is true: the dystopia is not-existent. Nevertheless, it is not futile or trivial: we immediately understand that it concerns us closely” (Muzzioli 2021, 26). A dystopia, as the name suggests, is a *dys-topos*, a bad place, in contrast to the *eutopos*, the good-place. However, the term “eutopia” coined by Thomas Moore also means an *ou-topos*, a no-place. Dystopias are the opposite of the good-place, but they can be an *ou-topos*, an imaginary reality,

as well as a concrete and tangible world. The utopia cannot. It cannot be reached and cannot be real without ceasing to be such. The utopia can quickly become a dystopia when it is realised and “what at first seems a utopia ... conceals terrifying dystopian consequences ... a utopia based on security and order hides a devastating loss of freedom” (Ilardi, Loche and Marras 2018, 13). A real utopia would become a dystopian totalitarian State because, despite the many forms that it can take and the different values on which it can be based. Utopia, in order to exist, would inevitably be imposed on those who do not share those values and that worldview.

Dystopia presents a stronger connection with reality compared to utopia. It is possible to find numerous examples of dystopian realities in history, such as natural catastrophes, despotic states, or plagues, whereas the only utopian worlds are mythological. While describing dystopias, Muzzioli highlights that if we imagine a utopia, it is because reality is already – at least in part – dystopian: “The first dystopian scenario is precisely the background on which utopia stands out: the real world” (2021, 41). The challenges a dystopian narrative presents should also not be viewed as purely hypothetical. Instead, dystopias unveil and challenge our world’s present norms, values, and dynamics.

In popular culture, dystopias are usually *ou-topos*, fictive worlds, but even if the dystopia is non-existent, it is, as Muzzioli defines it, *radicalmente storica* (radically historical): it can be found in our past, and it is, compared to utopia, verisimilar in our future (2021, 25–26). Even if *The Last of Us*’ zombies are clearly a fictive element, they are more a metaphor and a plot device to justify a world in ruins, in which the player has only terrible moral choices without society’s safety net. To survive such dystopian nightmares, we can try to rely on a hero.

A Hero forced to be a Villain

The word “hero” has ancient roots, but the mythological hero is very different from the hero we intended today. The mythological hero is not defined by noble and positive characteristics but rather by being “other”, different from ordinary human beings. Heroes are exceptional, but they are also frightful. Their actions could be noble and extraordinary but also atrocious and gruesome. The mythological

heroes are *Monstrum*, in the sense of the word's original meaning: exceptional beings who are simultaneously marvels and dangerous monsters. There are no fundamental differences between mythological heroes and the monsters they fight: "The fight between the hero and his adversary is ... always a fight between two heroes, who have the same qualities, 'good' and 'evil', 'positive' and 'negative', 'superhuman' and 'monstrous'" (Brelich 2010, 218).

Here, I use the word hero in the contemporary meaning of the word: an overall positive and noble character who has apparently lost his monstrous roots. I say "apparently" because even contemporary heroes – superheroes, for example – are characterized by ambiguous elements, among them hubris and excess, just as mythological ones are. The negative aspects, however, take second place compared to the general goodness of the hero, while the scariest aspects that characterized the mythical hero have not disappeared but rather survive in the villain. Heroes as they are understood today can therefore be seen as mainly positive characters because they are inserted in a dichotomous good-evil relationship with the villains. However, as we will see, the case of the anti-hero is different, more similar from this point of view to the heroes of myth.

Analysing the hero in connection with dystopian narratives is revealing: on the one hand, there is a reality where good and evil are not distinguishable anymore, and the world is chaotic and senseless – or, if meaning still exists, then it is distorted and corrupted. On the other hand, the hero is a figure who represents the good and fights for a noble purpose. The hero as he is today intended (the superhero, for example) proposes a clear distinction between good and evil, but this is not necessarily a definition; as Umberto Eco remarks in *The Myth of Superman*, to avoid any possible controversy, the concept of good is willingly left vague and represented only as charity (2016, 257–259). The more precise and accurate the definition of good becomes, the more critiques and disagreement could arise. At the same time, the dystopia, although negative, often forces one to clash with an ambiguous reality, where guilt and innocence are confused with each other. For heroes, such an ambiguous reality means a more ambiguous and complex role because a superficial and naïve distinction between good and evil becomes highly problematic, if not wholly impossible. The heroic model is bounded by such a dichotomous distinction, while the antihero questions it:

While the hero figure serves to strengthen the ideological status quo, by encouraging our support for an ideal, the anti-hero induces the reader to question the ideology behind the heroic model by virtue of its radical stance toward the “normal” order of things. (Simmons 2008, 89)

How can a figure be heroic inside a reality where the ideal is absent or gruesome and where to act means to resort to evil means? The only possible alternative would be inaction (which could make one equally guilty in terms of morality); however, a character who chooses not to act cannot be defined as a hero. The dystopia is no place for the hero but for the antihero.

It must be highlighted that the antihero is not the opposite of a hero:

The prefix ‘anti-’ is misleading. The antihero is ... not the absolute opposite of the hero (this would be the non-hero). Although a critical potential can be attributed to his existence, the antihero must not wholly and definitively oppose the hero. (Weinelt 2015, 16)

The antihero remains a hero but is more similar to the mythological hero than the contemporary heroic archetype. Moreover, they “can exist only if the heroic model remains present in absentia, by preterition” (Brombert 1999, 66).

The case of V is emblematic. Because of his undeniable heroic qualities, it is seductive and easy to limit oneself to seeing V as the noble hero who fights against a corrupt and evil system, but this interpretation is simplistic. Seeing V and the Guy Fawkes’ mask as a purely positive symbol of rebellion impoverishes the complexity of the character and brings him back to the comfortable hero-villain, good-evil dichotomy. Instead, it is necessary to use a different register in dealing with characters like V, Joel, or Ellie.

V’s mask is often used as an icon, a symbol of positive rebellion against despotic power. Nevertheless, V has all the characteristics that define a terrorist. “His actions can also be seen as those of a terrorist driven by a petty desire for revenge,” writes M. Grantham (2015, 56). V defines himself as a villain: “I’m the bogeyman. The villain ... The black sheep of the family” (Moore 2005, 13). He is aware that his actions are morally wrong; he tortures and kills, while his methods

include bombings and other terrorist techniques. V's inspirational figures are also controversial, like Macbeth, Satan, and – of course – Guy Fawkes, who tried, along with other conspirators, to assassinate James I of England by blowing up the House of Lords. Why, then, is V usually considered a noble hero? Why did the Guy Fawkes' mask he wears become a positive symbol of rebellion? The answers can be found in his dystopian London. Grantham writes, "Even terrorism can be interpreted as acceptable, though perhaps not condonable, in response to the hostile social reality in which the narrative is set" (66), and he continues:

Such actions may be morally reprehensible, but the social reality in which they are shown to exist has the capacity to position the reader to accept (though perhaps not condone) actions and ideologies they might otherwise condemn. This is aptly demonstrated in Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*. (2015, 168)

The antihero is "a phenomenon that develops in a specific constellation between subject, society and heroism" (Haller 2015, 63). The relation with society is crucial in defining an antihero. "The antihero is often a perturber and a disturber," writes Brombert (1999, 2). We could go further and affirm that the antiheroes are *inevitably* perturbers and disturbers because they are figures "who stand in opposition to a society that is perceived to have lost its moral, social, and political integrity" (Simmons 2008, 111). Thus, a society's growing corruption and immorality are directly responsible for the emergence of new antiheroes. Therefore, as the pinnacle of a negative society, the dystopia is the antiheroes' ideal habitat, as V's London shows.

The London of *V for Vendetta* is ruled by the Norsefire party, a fascist organisation similar to Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. To our eyes, it is a horrible society based on values that we find repellent, such as the repression of diversity and the imposition of order through the negation of individual freedom. V's fight against such a regime appears then noble: how can we – with our Western and democratic values – condemn V's terrorist actions inside this kind of society? V's purpose is revenge rather than justice. Nevertheless, what is the alternative to his London, where justice is in the hands of a totalitarian government? "The worst crime, murder, is accepted as the only possible justice in a world without law where human values are violated and wholly

infringed” (Muzzioli 2021, 272). To be a hero, V must be a villain. This challenge to the democratic reader’s moral views and values is typical of an antiheroic narrative:

The antiheroic nature ... serves to challenge previously established notions of morality and social convention, inevitably blurring the line between right and wrong, morality and immorality, thus providing new insight into broader concepts such as good and evil and how they have come to be perceived. (Grantham 2015, 3)

Especially in the extreme context provided by the dystopian situation, the antihero challenges our moral compass and we must accept and even condone actions that we would usually condemn as evil and immoral.

Sacrifices

Another of Alan Moore’s graphic novels in which the hero is deconstructed and set inside a dystopian world is *Watchmen*. *Watchmen*’s characters are directly linked to the modern superhero and his mythology. *Watchmen*’s America is maybe not yet as dystopian as V’s London, but it is on the verge of a nuclear apocalypse. This world is not endangered by some external menace but is self-destructing – what could be the hero’s role in such a scenario? Moore’s heroes are completely powerless. Night Owl is emblematic because his helplessness before the imminent apocalypse also becomes sexual impotence: “It’s this war, the feeling that it’s unavoidable. It makes me feel so powerless. So impotent” (Moore 2014, 231). Even the all-powerful Dr Manhattan cannot save humanity from itself: “Don’t you see the futility of asking me to save a world that I no longer have any stake in?” he tells Laurie (Silk Spectre), while they debate Earth’s destiny (2014, 288). He emphasises his powerlessness by describing himself as “just a puppet who can see the strings” (2014, 285).

Paradoxically, the only character who can save the world, thus remaining faithful to the superhero’s mission, is Ozymandias, who is sometimes seen as the story’s villain. However, inside a dystopian narrative, characters do not conform to simplistic *topoi* of the evil villain and the noble hero. Just as V cannot be defined simply as a hero, so Ozymandias cannot be defined purely as a villain. Ozymandias

brings the superhero's mission to its most extreme consequence: to save the world, he is forced to resort to the atrocity of mass murder.

In *Watchmen*, Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias) succeeds in saving the world from the nuclear apocalypse. Can his actions be justified? Is an atrocity condemnable if it prevents Armageddon? What is the difference between Ozymandias and V, who both kill to save their societies from themselves? "Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become a monster in the process. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you," writes Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* (2014, 107). This quote describes characters like V or Ozymandias, who both become monsters in fighting against evil. However, they are "evil" in the way Nietzsche meant the word: a challenge to the status quo and conventional morality. In order to create it is necessary to destroy, to be evil. "Zarathustra ist ein Freund der Bösen," he writes in *Ecce Homo: Zarathustra is a friend of the wicked* (2014, 369). The *Übermensch* is evil because he does not follow conventional morality but instead challenges it. He destroys it to establish a new one. Both V and Ozymandias are similar to an *Übermensch* because they choose to be "evil" and kill to set the conditions for future creation. V's following statement is emblematic:

Anarchy wears two faces, both creator and destroyer. Thus destroyers topple empires; make a canvas of clean rubble where creators can then build a better world. Rubble, once achieved, makes further ruins' means irrelevant. Away with our explosives, then! Away with our destroyers! They have no place within our better world. (Moore 2005, 222)

Should we conclude that V and Ozymandias are the same? Both use the same questionable methods, which cannot easily be justified. Ozymandias kills millions, but V's actions cause, directly or indirectly, the deaths and suffering of many people, who – even if to some degree complicit in the regime – do not necessarily deserve to die or be tortured. If life's value is immeasurable, cynical numbers cannot make a difference and killing one person is as wrong and inexcusable as killing thousands. From this point of view, there is no difference between V and Ozymandias. However, there is an essential difference in what they do after their missions are complete. V, aware of being a villain, chooses to die, while Ozymandias plans to rule the new world

he created. He makes clear in his answer to Silk Spectre, who wants to punish him for his deeds:

I saved Earth from hell. Next, I'll help her towards utopia ... Can't get away with it? Will you expose me, undoing the peace millions died for? Kill me, risking subsequent investigation? Morally, you're in checkmate ... Let's compromise. (Moore 2014, 402)

Ozymandias has no intention of being punished for his deeds. He plans to rule instead. By contrast, V is morally saved for his choice; like a Camusian *Homme Revolté*, he “knows what is good and, despite himself, does evil” (Camus 1992, 142). His world does not allow a non-violent solution; however, murder remains unjustifiable. “The rebel has only one way of reconciling himself with his act of murder if he allows himself to be led into performing it: to accept his own death and sacrifice. He kills and dies so that it shall be clear that murder is impossible” (Camus 1992, 140). To “achieve honour in metaphysical terms,” he must accept death to demonstrate that murder is unjustifiable: “Faithful to his origins, the rebel demonstrates by sacrifice that his real freedom is not freedom from murder but freedom from his own death” (Camus 1992, 142). His actions remain morally wrong, even if there is no alternative.

The *homme revolté* and these (anti)heroes are trapped in this paradox because they find themselves dealing with a dystopian reality that prevents heroism. The impossibility of a pure heroism that instead slips into a more ambiguous antiheroism does not necessarily mean the absence of evil. Dystopia is, by definition, a negative, evil reality. Moreover, the ambiguity of revolt could not exist if there was no evil to fight, as Camus observes:

If rebellion exists, it is because falsehood, injustice, and violence are part of the rebel's condition. He cannot, therefore, absolutely claim not to kill or lie, without renouncing his rebellion and accepting, once and for all, evil and murder. (1992, 142)

The rebellion is necessarily against something perceived as wrong. Still, the rebel – like the antihero described by Brombert – is “a perturber and a disturber” (1999, 2). His rebellion causes instability, destruction, and death. He must resort to the same evil means that he

is fighting. V, alongside his terrorist methods, uses the same oppressive control system (a supercomputer called “Fate”) against the Norsefire, while Ozymandias causes the same amount of death and destruction in New York City that an atomic bomb would have produced. Rebels and antiheroes must act, but – especially inside an evil and dystopian world – the action is necessarily evil itself:

Any act worthy of the name is by definition ‘evil’ or ‘bad’ (or will be seen as such), for it always represents a certain ‘overstepping of boundaries’, a change in ‘what is’, a ‘transgression’ of the limits of the given symbolic order (or community). (Zupančič 2000, 94)

The rebel’s world is unquestionably evil, as are his actions, even if they are justified. It is instead the good that becomes more ambiguous and uncertain. The only alternative to the rebellion would be inaction – the “silence” as Camus writes (1992, 143) – but it would be equally wrong. V is guilty due to his actions, but so are Londoners due to their silence. The citizens of London who submit to oppression without opposing the fascist government of Norsefire are also guilty, as is Dr Manhattan, who chooses to take no interest in humanity. “If the rebel makes no choice, he chooses the silence and slavery of others ... silence or murder—in either case, a surrender” (Camus 1992, 143).

Ruins

These two dystopias written by Alan Moore feature despotic and totalitarian states, contexts within which heroism entails moral compromise and resorting to evil actions. However, as dystopian as these worlds are, they are still possible human worlds, despite being distorted and horrific. It is still possible to distinguish between good and evil, although this distinction can be uncertain and ambiguous. There is still the possibility to make a moral choice, even if it is always – as Camus writes – a surrender. An easy and naïve choice between good and evil is impossible. As mentioned in the previous section, the only alternative is between rebellion and silence. However, inaction as the refusal of evil deeds does not translate into being good but rather into *omertà*, guilty indifference. Heroes, to be such, cannot rely on silence: they must act. However, the only possible heroic action is also inevitably evil:

Every truly ethical act worthy of the name appears as 'bad', 'evil', because ... it oversteps the boundaries of the established order, changes what it is regulated, it is a transgression of manners and right measures. (Petruccioli 2015, 48)

Nevertheless, in *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen*'s worlds there is the possibility of making an ethical choice and being a sort of hero, even if controversial and antiheroic. The dystopia of *The Last of Us* does not offer the same possibility.

The Last of Us is a survival-horror game set in a post-apocalyptic America. The dystopia of *The Last of Us* is the result of a catastrophe. Human society has ended and the world is infested with zombie-like creatures called "the infected." The infected represent the natural and chaotic dimension instead of the human one. They are not supernatural creatures but rather sick persons infected with a type of fungus. It is not entirely correct to describe these creatures as evil; like an earthquake or a hurricane, they represent a natural force, chaotic and destructive but amoral rather than immoral.

Human beings are forced to fight for survival, both against the infected and against other people for resources and shelter. There is no society to save or rebuild, but only small groups trying to stay alive. The collapse of society means the disappearance of moral order. The question of what is good almost completely loses its meaning; nothing goes beyond simple survival. The names of the small armed groups formed underline this dimension of animal struggle: the Wolves (WLF), the Hyenas (the Seraphites), or the Rattlers. These factions are not so concerned with fighting the infected but are in constant battle with each other with the sole purpose of dominating. In most cases, players find themselves clashing not so much with Runners and Clickers² but with other humans.

The dystopia, typically a future world, a prophecy of doom, regresses back to the past when it is a catastrophe. The catastrophic dystopia destroys and deletes cultural and technological achievements and throws human beings back into a primitive state. It is emblematic that in *The Last of Us*, one of the best weapons is a bow rather than a pistol because it is silent and has almost infinite ammunition. The infected represent a return to barbarism:

²Different types of infected.

The fantastic as a whole, with its demons, monsters, 'things' and various creatures, could be interpreted as nothing more than the recurring nightmare of a relapse from the social pact into the state of barbarism: dystopia can explicitly assume this fear, imagining a future in which history has gone back and put on the clothes of the past. (Muzzioli 2021, 125)

How can we talk about heroes in such a world? Without a good to fight for, or society to rebuild, what roles could the hero have? Inside a catastrophic dystopia, "There is no longer even a hero worthy of the name, capable of extraordinary actions, even if they are wrong. Rather, the hero becomes an unnecessarily aware observer, who can do nothing to avoid the catastrophe and indeed is overwhelmed by it" (Muzzioli 2021, 22).

The player takes the role of Joel in *The Last of Us 1* and Ellie (and Abby) in *The Last of Us 2*. That leads players to identify them (and thus also themselves) as the heroes of the story, but can we define Joel and Ellie as heroes? Like Ozymandias or V, both have heroic characteristics: they are courageous, resilient, and strong. They are capable of individual acts of heroism, but they are confined within the sphere of close relationships as Joel, Ellie, and Abby try to save their families, their friends, or to help their small communities. However, heroism in pursuit of a superior good that concerns humanity is forever lost, and their actions can be ruthless and cynical. The Hobbesian *homo homini lupus* rules the world of *The Last of Us*: "We're not murderers. We just survive," says Ellie to Joel. They both kill if they have to. However, inside a catastrophic world, the moral compass, rather than challenging as it was for V or Ozymandias, disappears almost completely. To kill is not good or evil but simply necessary. The only rule seems to be kill or be killed.

The killings in the game are never softened. The violence is always extreme, animalistic and dramatic. In a survival game such as *The Last of Us*, the player's main goal is to survive. Fighting and killing are not always the only solution and it is sometimes possible to escape an area without hurting anybody. However, sometimes fighting and, if the player wants to continue playing, killing are inevitable. Two quick time event sequences in *The Last of Us 2*, in which, playing as Ellie, the player must perform specific predefined actions to proceed with the game, are particularly brutal and unsettling. In the first, Nora, one

of the WLF members responsible for Joel's death, is repeatedly hit by the player with an iron pipe to extract information from her before she is finally killed. The second, less brutal but more traumatic, forces players to defend themselves from Mel, another WLF member in the late stages of pregnancy. There is no possibility of proceeding in the game without winning the fight, thus killing Mel.

The most significant difference between Alan Moore's antiheroes and *The Last of Us* protagonists is their mission. V and Ozymandias can be defined as heroic in terms of their mission: to save the world. In *The Last of Us*, neither Joel nor Ellie have a heroic agenda. However, one group of survivors wants to rebuild society and find a cure for the fungus: The Fireflies. In *The Last of Us 1*, the player works for the Fireflies. As Joel, he must take the young Ellie from Boston to Salt Lake City to the biggest Firefly base. Ellie is the only one immune to the fungus, and in Salt Lake, the Fireflies could be able to study her and find a cure. It seems a classic heroic mission to protect the girl and save the world, until the end of the game, when the two connected purposes come into conflict with each other: in order to study the fungus inside Ellie's brain, the Fireflies must kill her. Joel cannot accept it. In the game's final sequences, players must make their way into the Fireflies' base, killing everyone who tries to stop them from rescuing Ellie, until they reach the operating room, where Joel is forced to kill the surgeon, thus saving Ellie but taking away humanity's last hope. The conflict of values typical of an antiheroic narrative is particularly dramatic: is it acceptable to sacrifice a young girl to save the world? Like the surgeon, V and Ozymandias would probably say yes, but Joel cannot accept it.

In *The Last of Us 2*, we play as Ellie. She lives now in a small community, but her mission is not to protect it; she will abandon the small city almost immediately to seek revenge against Abby and her companions who, for unknown reasons, kill Joel. The player must track Abby by searching for her friends, questioning them, torturing them, and killing them: "I'm gonna find ... and I'm gonna kill ... every last one of them." Ellie is antiheroic rather than heroic, but she must avenge Joel, and thus be presented as an overall positive figure.

However, after the first half of the game, everything changes. After the player finds Abby, a flashback forces players to play as Abby and we discover that the surgeon killed by Joel in *The Last of Us 1* was Abby's father. We now understand the reasons she wanted revenge

on Joel. Her desire for revenge mirrors Ellie's: there is no difference between the two. As Abby, the player re-lives the last three days until the moment when Ellie finally meets Abby, only this time the player is forced to fight Ellie. The player must defeat her to continue playing. During several moments, the impression that we are about to kill Ellie is strong, but the only alternative would be to lose or stop playing. In the game, the player is forced as Ellie and Abby to commit atrocious actions, and it becomes impossible to define either as the heroine. The changing perspective highlights the impossibility of defining a heroine of the story, while the absence of human society coincides with the absence of a pure good worth fighting for.

Ellie's and Abby's motives are indistinguishable and so are their methods. However, it is not simply a question of perspective, nor a conflict of values; in an inhuman world, dominated by the infected and chaos, on what basis is it possible to distinguish between good and evil? The two concepts are not simply obscured but disappear altogether. The fight for survival becomes brutal, and it makes no difference if killing is done for revenge or survival. The world remains senseless, chaotic, and doomed, a natural world that does not allow heroes.

Dystopian Heroes

These three visions of dystopia force us to confront a different and extreme worldview – the reader's (or player's) moral compass clashes with a reality that does not allow a superficial dichotomy of good versus evil. Muzzioli calls it the “non-existence of any ethical principle” and states, “the use of immutable norms is not allowed in a world that constantly throws individuals in the arms of ever new crises” (2021, 130). However, evil survives inside a dystopia, which is by definition an evil world; even in the post-apocalyptic *The Last of Us*, the infected embody a sort of evil nature, a chaos opposed to a positive cosmos. Nevertheless, the good becomes elusive and questionable. Is V's revenge good? Is Ozymandias' plan heroic? The actions and methods of these characters are controversial, violent, lethal. However, the main problematic element remains the heroic mission. Inside a world that cannot be saved, heroes have no function. In *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*, there is still hope, an ideal to fight for. V, Ozymandias and Rorschach can still be dystopian heroes, however

controversial and antiheroic. In *The Last of Us*, Joel, Ellie and Abby have heroic characteristics, but they cannot be heroes. With the total collapse of society, the heroic purpose, except for circumscribed acts of individualistic heroism, is wholly lost.

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