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Please cite this publication as follows:

Butler, A.M. (2015) Disfigured myth: the destruction of London in postmillennial SF film. *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, 44 (122). pp. 20-32. ISSN 0306-4964258.

Link to official URL (if available):

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London Death Drives:

The Destruction of London in 2000s British SF Film

Andrew M Butler

There is a moment in *Reign of Fire* (Rob Bowman, 2002) when Quinn Abercromby (Christian Bale) climbs a wall from a river and gazes across at a semi-destroyed Palace of Westminster and says, “Well, this town’s gone to Hell.” It is not the only landmark to have survived several decades of destruction by dragons: Tower Bridge has also made it through. In this essay I wish to explore the symbolism and meaning of such landmarks, drawing upon ideas of Charles Peirce, Roland Barthes and Sigmund Freud, within the context of a number of twenty-first century British science-fiction films, notably *Reign of Fire*, *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle 2002), *28 Weeks Later* (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2007) and *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006).¹

It has to be admitted that the phenomena does not begin here. The late nineteenth-century invasion narratives are situated within the south east of England and H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898) benefits from having a map to hand. The apocalyptic fictions of S. Fowler Wright and M.P. Shiel follow suit, as do the cosy catastrophes of John Wyndham (notably *The Day of the Triffids* (1951)) and the psychological disasters of J.G. Ballard (notably *The Drowned World* (1962) and *Crash* (1973)). More recently China Miéville’s “*The Tain*” (2002) located itself in the heart of an invaded London.² Films and television have also featured London, with the Daily Express offices and other locations appearing in *The Day the*

Earth Caught Fire (Val Guest, 1961) and a derelict Albert Hall in *The Bed-Sitting Room* (Richard Lester, 1969). Doctor Who had the Daleks and Cybermen invading London in “The Dalek Invasion of Earth” (21 November-26 December 1964) and “The Invasion” (2 November-21 December 1968), along with countless other aliens and monsters. The Goodies imagined a giant kitten threatening London and ascending (and toppling) the Post Office Tower in “Kitten Kong” (12 November 1971).

The familiar landmarks stand as signifiers pointing to the signified of real London – a genuine location, familiar to viewers from news, documentaries and realist drama, as well as potentially from personal experience. The choice of landmarks is such that these are likely to have a resonance with viewers from the rest of the world too – whilst Salisbury and Canterbury cathedrals may not be distinguishable to everyone, St Paul’s Cathedral has become familiar. Similarly Tower Bridge states a film’s London credentials – see, for example, its use as a quarantine point in *Doomsday* (Neil Marshall, 2008) – even if it may occasionally be mistaken to be London Bridge. The mock-gothic towers suggest it is much older than it is (built 1886-94),³ part of the methodology of suggesting the eternal nature of Britain. No matter how fantastical the science-fiction elements of the film become, it is rooted in a recognisable location – even if the film makers’ geography can leave something to be desired.⁴ The unfamiliar is rooted in the familiar, the uncanny in the canny. It points to a sense of jeopardy – the audience may be made to care more because it appears to be a real rather than fictional location and allows for identification to a greater degree with the characters. As Peter Hutchings notes “the prominence of famous landmarks [function ...] as a guarantor that the story’s events are being played out in relation to a real city”.⁵ Charlotte Brunsdon notes the range of familiar landmarks that are taken to be instantly familiar: “the Palace of Westminster, Tower Bridge and Trafalgar Square and Nelson’s Column [...] the

Tower of London, St Paul's [...] Richard Rogers' 1986 Lloyd's Building, the Millennium Wheel, Tate Modern and 30 St Mary Axe (the Gherkin)".⁶ These are perhaps clichés of London, knowingly used by directors as a visual shorthand and consciously aping earlier films. Landmarks are shuffled and relocated from film to film and designate the paradigm of London.

The opening sequence of *Reign of Fire*, set some time before August 2005, begins with school child, Quinn Abercromby (Ben Thornton), stood in Trafalgar Square among the pigeons looking toward the Palace of Westminster and then visiting his mother (Alice Krige) in the workings for a Docklands Light Railway extension, somewhere in the Borough Road area south of the Thames. Whilst he is there, the workers discover a huge subterranean cave and Quinn is persuaded to crawl in to investigate. He discovers and wakens a sleeping dragon, narrowly escaping with his life. A montage of newspaper headlines and other images includes his story, then an inferno in Kenya, fires in Paris, a shot of the Elizabeth Tower, science magazines locating a new species, a US presidential order for bombing raids. Dragons seen off China, stylised fires across a globe, a mushroom cloud, a demolished city landscape, waking feet, before resuming with a rather older and buffer Quinn hewing a rock face with a pickaxe. The dragon has been there for millennia and has reproduced at an exponential rate, taking over the world.

This underground discovery echoes Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass and the Pit* (Rudolph Cartier, 22 December 1958- 26 January 1959; Roy Ward Baker, 1967), in which Martians from five million years ago are found at Hobbs Lane Underground, Knightsbridge, during an extension to the Central Line. Brunson notes that the Martian spaceship "embodies the generic hybridity of the film – buried deep below ground, it nevertheless seems to have come from

outer space. The horror of the film lies in the eruption of an archaic future – the awakening of a former invasion from Mars – and it is the disturbance of the earth in the proposed extension of the Underground which excites these hidden temporalities.”⁷ The excavation into historic London clay – indeed, prehistoric London clay – “muddles time, producing a space which is past and future, contemporary and archaic.”⁸ The television version was made in the aftermath of race riots⁹ and directly addresses the new multiculturalism of Britain, for example in including a Black workman among the digging crew. Brunson also notes the film’s contemporaneity with the excavation of the Victoria Line (1962-68), the first post-war line to be completed but with a name that looked back to the previous century, and the centrality of Miss Judd (Christine Finn/Barbara Shelley) as a competent female character who does not flee in clichéd horror.

I.Q. Hunter suggests that the “underlying fear is that postwar social changes, whether represented by the liberated young or by phenomena like race riots, will spark off ‘primitive’ urges hitherto damped down by consensual ideologies and the repressions of the British character.”¹⁰ Something that is novel – liberated women, immigrants – is paradoxically represented as something ancient and invokes the uncanny return of the repressed. Freud argues that “an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.”¹¹ The status of Britishness is challenged by something that is both anterior to and postdates it; its mechanisms are perpetuated by immigrants, workers and women, all of whom seem like spectral presences.

Quinn’s new life, as head of a small community of survivor in Northumbria, is interrupted by the arrival of the Kentucky Irregulars, under the leadership of Denton Van Zan (Matthew

McConnaghy). Van Zan has discovered the dragons' weakness – they find it hard to see in twilight – and proposes that the adult men help him on a mission to kill the sole male dragon. Quinn is reluctant, as Van Zan starts conscripting men, but eventually agrees to return to London and the scene of his mother's death. This is the point when they emerge on the south bank of the Thames – to the west of the original lair – and a showdown is staged. Van Zan climbs a tower and attracts the dragon's attention, throwing himself into the air where he is caught and eaten by the reptile. This enables a shot revealing Tower Bridge in the background, the towers remaining, but the bascules destroyed. It is left to Quinn to finally kill the male and to return north to his settlement.

In the simplified signifying model we take from Charles Peirce, a sign can have iconic, indexical or symbolic qualities. These three relations map onto the connections between the object, the interpretant who perceives the object and the referent in which the interpretant (and in theory the object) exist. The icon is a representation of an object and is likely to consist of different materials from the object; indeed the object itself may not exist as such. It “excite[s] analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness”¹² and thus depends on a degree of recognition by the viewer, either from the real world or between shots. This marks a relationship between the interpretant and the object. The indexical sign points to the existence of something – as in the adage, “there's no smoke without fire”. This marks a relationship between the object and the referent, and there is a concrete, physical connection between the two. Finally, the symbolic relation is one where a deeper idea or notion is represented, requiring the existence of the interpretant for that idea to be held. This marks a relationship between the interpretant and the referent. The ruined Palace of Westminster in *Reign of Fire* is a representation of a real building, here in ruins, operating on the most obvious level of signification to perform the characters' location. It is indexical of the

decades of death and destruction wrought by the dragons, especially the fire that folklore associates with them and the film represents – here is where the fire reigns from. And finally on a symbolic level, the Palace of Westminster symbolizes the Mother of Parliament, a millennium old place of royal and political leadership, largely burned down in 1512, threatened with destruction by Guy Fawkes in 1605, burned again in 1834 and rebuilt by Charles Barry with the assistance of Augustus Pugin.

The associations of the Palace of Westminster and the other cinematic landmarks are mythic in the senses used by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. Lévi-Strauss suggests that “a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: before the world was created, or during its first stages – anyway, long ago”¹³ and, whilst clearly the cinematic landmarks are not that old, the notion of the past is invoked. He goes on to assert that “what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future”.¹⁴ The Palace of Westminster is represented as archaic in the sense of age and of power, its power is everlasting and explains British society. Barthes’ version of myth would build upon that “alleged” and undercut the everlasting nature of the pattern: myth is a predominately right of centre form of cultural production that operates ideologically to naturalise the status quo.

In his analysis “Wine and Milk”, Barthes notes that “[French] society calls anyone who does not believe in wine by names such as sick, disabled or depraved: it does not comprehend him[. ...] an award of good integration is given to whoever is a practicing wine-drinker: knowing how to drink is a national technique which serves to qualify the Frenchman”.¹⁵

Wine carries with it values of Frenchness, and is also a product of French industry – further it

is a product of industry that has been expanded beyond the immediate boundaries of the country to its colonies:

its production is deeply involved in French capitalism, whether it is that of the private distillers or that of the big settlers in Algeria who impose on the Muslims, on the very land of which they have been dispossessed, a crop of which they have no need, while they lack even bread.¹⁶

The myth of wine thus allows the circulation of the ideas of Frenchness whilst suppressing the narrative of colonial and working-class oppression which allows its consumption: “wine cannot be an unalloyedly blissful substance, except if we wrongfully forget that it is also the product of an expropriation”.¹⁷ Barthes later asserts: “Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact”.¹⁸ Myth creates an image of the past to assert the eternal, everlasting and natural nature of the present.

In the theoretical polemic that frames his *Mythologies*, “Myth Today”, Barthes analyses a photograph of a saluting young, black soldier from the cover of an issue of *Paris Match*. Barthes assumes that the soldier is saluting the tricolour, the French flag, and that the message of this picture is that “France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.”¹⁹ Simultaneously, the life story of the soldier is erased (how he came to be recruited, the circumstance in which he is saluting, what explains the look in his eyes) and made solid (he is the zenith of French patriotism). Barthes offers three competing readings of the sign: an example and symbol of French imperialism, an alibi for French imperialism and

the presence of French imperialism. What is key is the way in which the image naturalises French imperialism.

Tom Shippey has taken Barthes' methodology and applied it to a reading of a recurring science-fiction trope: a toppled or destroyed Statue of Liberty – a cover to Fantasy and Science Fiction (December 1966) and Norman Spinrad's "A Thing of Beauty" (1973). As a sign, the Statue of Liberty stands for American values – part of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – and is associated, through the words of Emma Lazarus' sonnet "The New Colossus", with an open door to the oppressed: "'Give me your tired, your poor,/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free". Placed on an island (named Liberty Island) in New York Harbor, it would have been passed by many of the immigrants to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is also a symbol and entente between French and American imperial powers. Shippey argues that the ruined sign has a further meaning: "one has to see first that the Statue [of Liberty] has a mythical significance, and then to see that this significance is being denied."²⁰ Drawing on ideas of Paul De Man, Shippey argues that this is a myth disfigured, "offering a national ideal something other than reverence: it was offering the notion that America might (would? should? must?) eventually fall."²¹ In these films under consideration we see a small number of London landmarks destroyed, under threat or repurposed: the Houses of Parliament or Palace of Westminster, especially the Clock Tower (now Elizabeth Tower) popularly referred to as Big Ben and Westminster Bridge; Trafalgar Square with the National Gallery and Admiralty Arch; St Paul's Cathedral, the Millennium Bridge and Tate Modern; Tower Bridge; Battersea Power Station; the BT Tower usually known as the Post Office Tower; the Millennium Dome and 30 St Mary Axe.

The question is how to define the myth that is being promulgated or undercut by these landmarks. It could be objected that they are likely to have a number of different, since the films are the labour of a series of directors, scriptwriters, producers, special effects technicians and so forth, but myth appears to transcend individual authorship: Barthes argues that

The whole of France is steeped in this anonymous ideology: our press, our films, our theatre, our pulp literature, our rituals, our Justice, our diplomacy, our conversations, our remarks about the weather, a murder trial, a touching wedding, the cooking we dream of, the garments we wear, everything, in everyday life, is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie has and makes us have of the relations between man and the world.²²

and there is no reason not to assume that substituting the word “British” here would not also be true of British mythology.

But should it be the word “British”? In the run up to the Scottish independence referendum in September 2014, the supporters of the no campaign articulated that there was something definably British without ever quite being able to define it beyond the notion of tolerance. There is the nation of shopkeepers label from Napoleon, the playing fields of Eton, the stiff upper lip and sense of fair play, above all a sense of an unbroken line of heritage. In 1990, Norman Tebbit suggested that one could establish Britishness by seeing which side one cheered for in an England cricket match. There is all too often a slippage from Britain to England to the south east to London – and in an illustration of how the ruling class dictate the ruling ideas, it is dominated by the white, male, upper middle classes. I have already noted that *Reign of Fire* moves from London to Northumbria and back; *28 Days Later*, after a Cambridge prologue, shifts north, *Children of Men* begins in London but moves to a Kentish

road to Canterbury and to Bexhill, Sussex. There is less effort to find landmarks in such sequences, so I will not focus on the non-metropolitan sequences. In discussing British national cinema, Andrew Higson notes the significance in British identity of patrician benevolence, deference to authority, classlessness, obligation and duty, but “there is a powerful, coherent, and pervasive image of the people in English culture, an image of an organic community which is hierarchically and deferentially organized, as if this were entirely natural.”²³ Note again the slippage between Britain and England.

London is the former centre of an empire that spread across the world, with explorers, traders and armies flowing in one direction and gold, tea, sugar, coffee, diamonds and wealth flowing in the other, for a period underscored by slavery in the colonies. A combination of geology and geography kick-started an industrial revolution, which both demanded raw materials and created consumers goods, in time created and requiring a moneyed, leisured, middle class market. Some of the spoils of empire ended up in the British Museum, where they could be “protected” and “looked after”. An accident of geography – the line drawn north and south from London through the poles would continue through Pacific – made London (in particular Greenwich) a convenient location for the Prime Meridian established in 1851 and confirmed in 1884 as the longitudinal centre for mapping. London became the centre of time, space, trade and culture. The Church of England, in theory centred on Canterbury but arguably as located in Lambeth Palace and Westminster Abbey, is a belief-system with a worldwide congregation that dominated intellectual and cultural life – with many on the left being defined by their nonconformist (Methodist, Quaker, Unitarian etc.) backgrounds. The BBC became a pioneering national and international broadcaster through radio, with its television programmes receiving international distribution. But this empire has long since collapsed, with the twentieth century seeing colonies one-by-one being given or

taking their independence. Britain continues to assert its significance – as cultural hub, as birthplace of the widest distributed if not spoken language, as stock market, as cradle of democracy – in a way that is more mythic than actual.

This island story was most obviously seen in the four hour opening ceremony to the 2012 Olympics, *Isles of Wonder*, which drew on British history, literature, film, music and technology and celebrated, among other things, the Industrial Revolution and the National Health Service, and featured a cameo of the Queen supposedly jumping into the stadium from a helicopter with James Bond. Its director was Danny Boyle, who also directed *28 Days Later*. At the time of the sequel's release, Boyle said

“I think the key thing about Britain is that it's built on this deep, dark ocean of history. There are grassy, picturesque areas of London which you still can't put train tunnels through because they're actually covering plague pits. You just don't get that in America – that dark abyss of the past.”²⁴

In *28 Days Later* he draws upon that mythic past of London and brings back plague victims as a kind of technologised undead. As Jayna Brown observes, “It echoes the memory of the Great Plague of London in 1665, which ended in the great fire of London. As a result of this plague, most London residents fled, but doctors and apothecaries (early pharmacists) stayed in the city.”²⁵

The prologue establishes that a virus, *Rage*, has been released from an experimental laboratory in Cambridge after a raid by animal liberationists, and the majority of the British population have been infected, becoming crazed zombie-like beings. In an echo of the opening of *The Day of the Triffids*, cycle courier Jim (Cillian Murphy) wakes up alone in St Thomas' Hospital, unaware of the unfolding disaster. He wanders around a deserted London,

crossing Waterloo Bridge with a view of St Paul's in the background, passes the Palace of Westminster and Horse Guards Parade, before crossing St James' Park to the Duke of York Steps by the ICA. He makes his way up to Tottenham Court Road and the Centre Point tower, before going to Piccadilly Circus, now transformed into a message board for the missing and the presumed dead. He is pursued by infected people, before being rescued by Selena (Naomie Harris) and Mark (Noah Huntley), and taken to a hideout in an Underground station. Selena and Mark accompany him to Deptford, where he discovers that his parents have killed themselves, and Mark is infected and killed. Jim and Selena retreat to the Balfron Tower (designed by Ernő Goldfinger in 1963) in Poplar, East London, where they meet and stay with Frank (Brendan Gleeson) and his daughter, Hannah (Megan Burns).

Having passed an iconic (but overturned) red London Routemaster bus earlier in his wanderings, Jim now leaves the city in a London black cab and is driven through the kind of idyllic rural landscape that forms the mythic green and pleasant land. They are in search of a group of survivors who claim to have the answer to the virus, in the vicinity of Manchester, who turn out to be a quasi-military operation run by Major Henry West (Christopher Eccleston). This is a familiar trope from Wyndham and other cosy catastrophe novels, as well as *Survivors* (1974-77); West's name is presumably a nod to the various kings of that name, especially the eighth, and his surname a nod to the hegemony. With his demands for obedience and his threats of rape, he represents the worst aspect of medieval baronies. For Brown, this evokes "Britain at the height of the colonial era".²⁶ Both the white (but underage) Hannah and black Selena are second class citizens, lacking the full rights that might be grudgingly offered to Jim (played by an Irish actor) if he agrees to conform. Britain has collapsed and has the chance to rebuild – the film critiques an attempt to rebuild it in the same image.

28 Weeks Later begins when Don (Robert Carlyle), his wife Alice (Catherine McCormack) and other survivors let a young boy into their country cottage on the outskirts of London. Unfortunately, the infected have followed him and attack; Don escapes, assuming Alice to have been killed. Meanwhile, Don and Alice's children, Tammy (Imogen Poots) and Andy (Mackintosh Muggleton) return from a school holiday in Spain to a Britain under American martial law and are interned in District One (the Isle of Dogs). They are reunited with Don, but, when Andy becomes worried that he has forgotten their mother's face, he and Tammy escape to find a picture of her in their house near Wembley. A looted moped eases their journey, and naturally they cross the river at Tower Bridge, from north to south so that the Gherkin can be visible in the shot, and pass St Paul's. Remarkably, they find their mother camped out in their old house, apparently infected but calm in their presence, and the three are returned to District One where Don is infected by his wife. As Rage spreads around the enclave, the children are helped to escape and told to make their way to the new Wembley Stadium, where they will be airlifted to safety; Don pursues them as the US military decide to bomb Docklands.

Whilst – even a year before the 2008 banking crisis hit – there is an undeniable pleasure in seeing an attack in one of the heartlands of British capitalism, there is also an unease at the brutality of the American intervention. If 28 Days Later was frequently read for its (unwitting) echoes of 9/11 imagery, so 28 Weeks Later acknowledges five years of American military manoeuvres. Nicole Birch-Bayley argues that, “28 Weeks Later in many ways mirrors the pervading sense of futility in modern military intervention. Like the contemporary intercession in Iraq, the attempts of the American troops to assist in solving the problems of London and the rage virus merely result in antagonizing the situation.”²⁷ Neither civilian nor

military organisations are able to resist the anarchy of Rage. The use of a special effect of the new Wembley Stadium points to the film's very contemporaneity, whilst a brief shot of rampaging plague victims and the instantly recognisable Eiffel Tower is indexical of a downbeat ending where France has now been infected.

Alfonso Cuarón's adaptation of P.D. James' 1992 dystopia makes many changes to its source material. The Oxford don Dr Theo Faron keeps a diary of a Britain transformed by the drop in sperm rates to zero, and the consequent lack of births. Faron's cousin Xan Lyppiatt, has appointed himself Warden of England and has abolished democracy. Faron is approached by the Five Fishes organisation and asked to approach Lyppiatt to ask for reform, but this fails. Faron goes to mainland Europe for the summer and returns to find Julian, the wife of the leader of the Five Fishes, is pregnant. In the film, Faron (Clive Owen) is a former activist turned bureaucrat, who we first see hearing the news of the killing of the last born human in a café near St Paul's cathedral. There is an explosion, but Faron escapes unscathed aside from a ringing in his ears. Here all the women have become infertile and Britain has become a totalitarian state. Faron is kidnapped by the Fishes, and asked by one of their leaders, his ex-wife Julian (Juliane Moore), to get exit papers for a woman, Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey). Theo arranges to have a meeting with Nigel (Danny Huston), his cousin a government minister, and is driven across London via Buckingham Palace to Battersea Power Station (designed by Theo J. Halliday and Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, built 1929-35). The latter is a symbol for London's industrial heritage but – as the inflatable flying pigs in the back of shots reminds us – became known through its use as the cover to Pink Floyd's *Animals* (1977). While this establishes the scene as supposedly within Battersea Power Station, the interior ramp is clearly Tate Modern, the revamped Bankside Power Station (designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, built 1947-63). The power station has become an “ark of art”, including

Michelangelo's David (1501-4), Pablo Picasso's anti-war Guernica (1937) and Banksy's Kissing Policemen, each of which must have been appropriated from other collections. For much of the film Faron wears a London 2012 t-shirt, confirming the action as being after the London Olympics.

London here is one of barriers and check points, of areas out of bounds and fenced off. It is fortress Britain at its most blatant, with a white, straight, middle class male as its viewpoint character on a journey of redemption toward an image of the Holy Family (Joseph/Theo, Kee/Mary and Dillon/Jesus) floating toward a rescue boat, Tomorrow, from the Human Project who are looking to repopulate the world. Zahid R. Chaudhary notes the mythic weight that Kee is made to carry "Eve, Madonna, Earth Mother, figure of subjection, animal-like black woman, humanity's last and only hope, excessively fertile black woman, damsel in distress"²⁸ The future of the British world is dependent on an illegal immigrant now in exile just as Britain had been built upon the spoils of empire. It is not clear that this latter group will use Kee any less than the Fishes or the British government.

The deliberate imagining of traumatic events, the insistent disfiguring of myth, might be understood through the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Peter Hutchings notes how "the city's emptiness [... is] revealed as deceptive, with something monstrous lurking behind the scenes."²⁹ He reaches for the term "uncanny", Freud's term for the horror derived from the return of repressed memories as well as for the catalytic object or experience – doubles, ghosts, crypts, corpses and so on – that leads to such recall. In one of his case studies, Freud describes the apocalyptic fantasies of Daniel Paul Schreber:

At the climax of his illness, [...] Schreber became convinced of the imminence of a great catastrophe, of the end of the world. Voices told him that the work of the

past 14,000 years had now come to nothing, and that the earth's allotted span was only 212 years more; and [...] he believed that that period had already elapsed. He himself was 'the only real man left alive', and the few human shapes that he still saw - the doctor, the attendants, the other patients - he explained as being 'miracled up, cursorily improvised men'. [...] He had various theories of the cause of the catastrophe. At one time he had in mind a process of glaciation owing to the withdrawal of the sun; at another it was to be destruction by an earthquake.³⁰

Schreber had been an appeal court judge with paranoid delusions and had been diagnosed as a repressed passive homosexual. The individual who suffers the uncanny experience is driven back to an earlier state of their psychosexual development - the castration anxieties of the Oedipus complex, the sadomasochistic stages of the anal and oral phases. The question is why individuals deliberately choose to experience the uncanny.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud describes his grandson's habit of throwing objects away from him. In particular, he had a wooden toy on a string that he would propel out of sight whilst crying, "o-o-o-o", and then reel it joyfully in again with the word "Da" ("there"). Freud and the boy's mother suggested that the first cry was a version of the German word *Fort* ("gone"), and there was a sorrow and joy being staged with the deliberate exiling and return of the object. The *Fort-Da* game enabled the child to come to terms with feelings of loss over his often absent mother, to inoculate against that fear of absence which in a sense is a fear of death. What has become popularly known as the *Death Drive* - but is better translated as the *Death Instinct* - is paradoxically a survival tactic that reassures a traumatised subject. We see a burning London, a toppled Tower Bridge, which will reassure ourselves that London will not fall.

Within the films, we repeatedly come across parent-child dyads that would risk uncannily resurrecting the Oedipus complex. In *28 Days Later*, Jim finds his parents have committed suicide, preventing his parricide (and perhaps stirring a sense of guilt over that forbidden desire) and any acting out of the desire for the mother. In *28 Weeks Later*, Tammy and Andy see their parents transformed into uncanny, infected doubles, no longer the lover figures they should be. In *Children of Men*, the issue of infertility foregrounds such relationships by putting a pregnant mother in jeopardy; Theo, whose son Dillon has died, has a sacrificial father figure in the shape of Jasper (Michael Caine) and gains a substitute son when Kee declares that she will name her baby after him. Most strikingly, the death of Quinn's mother is part of the primal trauma of the dragon apocalypse in *Reign of Fire*, and he has to return to that nest to kill the father dragon. We see Quinn as substitute father to the children in the north – acting out an Oedipal drama from *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) – as good father in conflict with the bad American paternalism of Van Zan.

There are a number of traumas that the films may be responding to. Much post-Second World War British science fiction seems to be responding to that war and the curious utopia of the Blitz spirit, as well as the ability to begin again from scratch that was made possible by the destruction. The Cold War anxieties also led to a questioning of western values and the shared values of the Allied powers, with the spectre of a final, apocalyptic Third World War and nuclear Armageddon. Whilst these films were about sixty years after the end of the Second World War and two decades after the end of the Cold War, these battles are replayed, and their directors came of age during the era of nuclear paranoia. It also seems that the scars of British imperialism are revealed by these films – the post-imperial melancholy of losing an empire and not finding a role, the guilt over slavery and oppression, with London as the

uncanny, guilty-ridden black hole at the heart of that collapse. Roger Luckhurst argues that London becomes “understood as a site saturated with the iconography and geography of imperial power, but which has been transformed by the twin effects of the dismantlement of empire and successive waves of migrations from former colonies.”³¹ The significance of Black women should be noted in the films³² and *Children of Men* directly represents British fears of immigrants. American interference in British affairs is also clearly resented in *Reign of Fire* and *28 Weeks Later*.

At the heart of these films is a kind of struggle between the myth and the myth's disfigurement, made all the more intense by the ongoing difficulties of defining the British myth. The films both assert and unassert the heritage of Britain, the eternity of Britishness whilst showing that Britishness is under attack from something from an earlier era or from beyond its fortress shores. At the height of Tony Blair's government, which had wrapped itself in *Cool Britannia* and the new,³³ anticipating and echoing the aftermath to 9/11, these films dramatize anxieties about Britishness. Hutchings argues that “Ultimately, perhaps, their significance lies mainly in the negations they offer of more confident assertions of identity found elsewhere in British culture during this period. In placing question marks over particular landscapes, and rendering those question marks as bloody and as threatening as possible, such fictions generate unease about who the British are and where they came from (and where they might be going). That the fictions offer no real answers to the questions they raise is possibly their most disturbing aspect.”³⁴ The disfiguring of the myth might, as Shippey argues, indicate that these things shall pass – but in the dramatization of the return of the repressed there is also an expression of the life affirming qualities of the Death Drive. This allows the myth of Britishness to be asserted, insisted on and enacted through an act of irony.

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- ¹ The director of *Reign of Fire* is American, of *28 Weeks Later*, *Spanish and Children of Men*, *Mexican* but each have a British star. *28 Days Later* is a UK production (with an Irish star), *Children of Men* is US/UK, *28 Weeks Later* is UK/Spanish and *Reign of Fire* is a US/Irish production.
- ² For a discussion of Miéville's use of a ruined London see my (2013) "The Tain and the Tain: China Miéville's Gift of Uncanny London", *CR: The New Centennial Review* 13(2), pp. 133-53.
- ³ *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (Tim Burton, 2007) features the bridge in its opening shot, despite a setting of 1846. *Sherlock Holmes* (Guy Ritchie, 2009), set 1891, rightly shows it still being built, even if it seems rather too close to the Palace of Westminster.
- ⁴ Steve Kerry noted to me that the twilight shot of the dragon flying across London is back to front, with the sun in the wrong direction. Nevertheless, the presence in the background of Tower Bridge is indexical of the city being London.
- ⁵ Peter Hutchings (2009) "Horror London", *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 6(2), pp. 190-206, p. 196
- ⁶ Charlotte Brunsdon (2007) *London in Cinema: The Cinematic City since 1945*, London: BFI Publishing, p. 22.
- ⁷ Brunsdon, p. 10.
- ⁸ Brunsdon, p. 11.
- ⁹ Cf. "Well, I don't like the term 'science-fiction', but if we're going to bandy it about, it could be applied just as well to the world we live in. The form is appropriate, if taken seriously. And that is the way I do take it. I try to give those stories some relevance to what is round about us today. That last one, for instance, was a race-hatred fable that broke through to an encouragingly large and intelligent audience." Nigel Kneale, (1959) "Not Quite So Intimate", *Sight and Sound*, 28(2), p.86.
- ¹⁰ I. Q. Hunter (1999) "The Day the Earth Caught Fire", in I.Q. Hunter, ed., *British Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Routledge), pp. 99-112, p. 110.
- ¹¹ Sigmund Freud (1985) "The Uncanny", in Albert Dickson ed., *Art and Literature; Jensen's "Gradiva", Leonardo Da Vinci and Other Works*, (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin), pp. 335-76, p. 372.
- ¹² NEEDS REFERENCE OR CUTTING
- ¹³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, (1955), "The Structural Study of Myth", *Journal of American Folklore*, 68(270), pp.428-444, p. 430.
- ¹⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, (1955), "The Structural Study of Myth", *Journal of American Folklore*, 68(270), pp.428-444, p. 430.
- ¹⁵ Roland Barthes (1972) *Mythologies* (London: Cape), p. 59.
- ¹⁶ Roland Barthes (1972) *Mythologies*, p.61
- ¹⁷ Roland Barthes (1972) *Mythologies*, p. 61
- ¹⁸ Roland Barthes (1972) *Mythologies*, p. 143.
- ¹⁹ Roland Barthes (1972) *Mythologies*, p. 115.
- ²⁰ Tom Shippey (1991) "The Fall of America in Science Fiction", in Tom Shippey, ed. *Fictional Space*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell for The English Association), pp. 104-32, p. 106.
- ²¹ Tom Shippey (1991) "The Fall of America in Science Fiction", p. 108.
- ²² Roland Barthes (1972) *Mythologies*, p. 139.
- ²³ Andrew Higson (1995) *Waving the Flag: constructing a national cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon), p. 44.

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- ²⁴ Mark Kermode (2007) "A Capital Place For Panic Attacks", *The Observer* (6 May), <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/may/06/features.review>
- ²⁵ Jayna Brown, (2013) "The Human Project: Utopia, Dystopia, and the Black Heroine in *Children of Men* and *28 Days Later*", *Transition*, 110, pp. 120-135, p. 133.
- ²⁶ Jayna Brown, (2013) "The Human Project: Utopia, Dystopia, and the Black Heroine in *Children of Men* and *28 Days Later*", p. 134.
- ²⁷ Nicole Birch-Bayley (2012) "Terror in Horror Genres: The Global Media and the Millennial Zombie", *Journal of Popular Culture*, 45(6), pp.1137-1151 1143.
- ²⁸ Zahid R. Chaudhary (2009) "Humanity Adrift: Race, Materiality, and Allegory in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," *Camera Obscura* 72 pp. 73-109, p. 96.
- ²⁹ Peter Hutchings (2009) "Horror London", p. 197.
- ³⁰ NEEDS REFERENCE
- ³¹ Roger Luckhurst, (2005) "Literary London: Post-, Ex-, Trans-, Neo-?" *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, 2005, Vol.31(2), pp.293-305, p. 295
- ³² See, for example, Jayna Brown, (2013) "The Human Project", Zahid R. Chaudhary (2009) "Humanity Adrift" and Sarah Trimble (2011) "Maternal Back/grounds in *Children of Men*: Notes Toward an Arendtian Biopolitics", *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 4(2), pp.249-270. It might also be noted that zombies are associated with Haitian culture, albeit a French rather than British colony.
- ³³ For the context to and a critique of Cool Britannia see Roger Luckhurst (2003) "Cultural Governance, New Labor, and the British Science Fiction Boom" *Science Fiction Studies*, 30(3), pp.417-35 and Andrew M. Butler (2003) "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom", *Science Fiction Studies* 30(3), pp. 374-393. My use of post-imperial melancholy is indebted to Luckhurst's work. See also Ian Nairn (1981) *The Breakup of Britain: Crisis and Post-Nationalism* (London: NLP) and Ian Baucom (1996) "Mournful Histories: Narratives of Postimperial Melancholy", *Modern Fiction Studies* 42(2), pp. 259-88.
- ³⁴ Peter Hutchings (2004) "Uncanny Landscapes in British Film and Television", *Visual Culture in Britain* 5.2, 27-40, p. 39.