

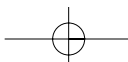
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Uncanny Landscapes in British Film and Television

Beneath the heritage landscape

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, critical writings on British film and television have often related notions of landscape to heritage culture. The British landscape – or, more usually in heritage drama, the English pastoral landscape and the architecture located within it – is figured in this context as a valuable resource that certain films and television programmes deploy in their attempts to be distinctive and successful within international entertainment markets. An additional economic effect sometimes resulting from this success is the encouragement of a tourism based around locations associated with heritage drama. This applies not just to what might be termed the ‘classic’ heritage products of the 1980s – including *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Room with a View* (1986) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) – but also for later work that seeks to extend or transform some of the parameters of heritage. *Elizabeth* (1998), for example, offers a darker and considerably more violent rendition of English history than that found in 1980s heritage dramas but is as reliant as they are on locations and buildings (including Alnwick Castle, Durham Cathedral and York Minster) that, regardless of their function within the film, have a clear touristic significance and value.

Heritage as a term denoting a particular set of interrelated commercial and cultural practices is very much associated with the 1980s, and later critical understandings of it have been coloured by the Thatcherite context of its initial formation. In particular, the association of this type of media product with nostalgia and pastiche has been seen as involving both superfluity and an avoidance of some of the social upheavals of the Thatcher era. It is interesting in this respect that 1980s heritage drama has often been contrasted with other 1980s films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) that are seen as offering a more realistic, politicized and meaningful engagement with the state of contemporary Britain than their heritage counterparts. In part at least, the critical favour with which these realistic projects have been received in some quarters has something to do with their suppression of the picturesque and the touristic, with this applying not just to 1980s social-critical projects but also to later ‘Brit-grit’ tales of social deprivation such as *Raining Stones* (1993) and *Nil by Mouth* (1997) and ‘underclass’ films such as *The Full Monty* (1997) (which opens with a heavily ironized touristic view of Sheffield). A predominance of contemporary urban settings as opposed to the predominantly period rural settings of 1980s heritage helps to underline claims to social relevance and topicality.¹ In the



same period a number of experimental projects have also thrown into question some of the more facile appropriations of landscape offered by heritage drama by interrogating that landscape in terms of the histories that have defined its function and identity. One thinks here in particular of the work of Peter Greenaway – especially *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1983) and *Drowning by Numbers* (1988), and Patrick Keiller – notably *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997), the latter of which has been described as a 'devastating riposte to Heritage Cinema.'²

It seems from all this activity, which has been supported by various critical attacks on heritage culture itself, that commercial visual-cultural uses of landscape have become deeply suspect, associated as they are with a prettified, escapist marketing of an unreal image of Britain and British life. However, as has been pointed out by a number of critics and historians, British films and television programmes before and after the 1980s have frequently utilized the landscape as a way of promoting Britishness (or, more usually, Englishness) either as an ideology or as a form of product differentiation, and done so in ways that depart in certain respects from the strategies adopted by 1980s heritage.³ Period dramas are not always as decorous as they were in the 1980s, and neither is there invariably a reliance on the pastoral or rural at the expense of the urban or less obviously pleasant country scenes. One thinks here, for example, of numerous fog-bound Jack-the-Ripper dramas made for both the big and small screen that represent London as a libidinous 'city of dreadful delights', or the atmospheric use made of tough-looking moorland in the 1968 and 2002 BBC television adaptations of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (featuring, respectively, Peter Cushing and Richard Roxburgh as Sherlock Holmes).⁴ Indeed, such menacing cityscapes and landscapes, which form part of what might be termed 'dark heritage', are in their own way just as picturesque and marketable as their more conventionally pretty counterparts, and can signify Britishness as much as, if not more so than, the critically privileged heritage dramas. Present-day cityscapes and landscapes can also serve or support a promotional function. Amy Sargeant has pointed in this respect to the value of the television series *Inspector Morse* (1987–2000) and *Peak Practice* (1993–2002) to the promotion of, respectively, Oxford and Derbyshire.⁵ Similarly, contemporary London features as an attractive Ripperless 'city of delight' in a cluster of recent films, including *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) and *Notting Hill* (1999) which, as Robert Murphy indicates, 'dwell upon the pleasures and excitement of living in London in ways which echo Swinging London films of the 60s' such as *The Knack* (1965) and *Smashing Time* (1967).⁶

What arguably links together these uses of picturesque locations in British cinema and television is the powerful sense that the locations themselves are in some way owned by the British, that they form a national resource that helps to define what is distinctive (and often what is marketable) about 'our country'. Of course, this 'our', and the model of national identity associated with it, is invariably contentious and subject to multiple contestations, both by other films and television programmes and in the critical responses generated by media texts. Far from being a 'natural' resource, the rural landscape in

particular emerges from this critical activity as something constructed and packaged with particular commercial and ideological interests in mind, as indeed something best analyzed and understood through its economic productivity and its historical involvement in social power relations. The aforementioned work of Greenaway and Keiller, for example, problematizes the very idea of a unified national identity. Critics too have frequently questioned or rejected models of national identity that elide class, gender or racial difference in the interests of a deceptive uniformity and unity or which privilege Britishness or Englishness over Scottishness, Welshness, Irishness or regional identities. This attitude can spill over into evaluations of cinematic and televisual landscapes and cityscapes: for example, the London film *Notting Hill* was criticized by some for offering an 'unreal' view of life in the capital that was directed more at an international audience than it was at a British one (although the film was commercially successful in Britain).⁷

There is yet another type of landscape to be found in British film and television, however. It is a landscape that resists some of the attractions of the picturesque but which at the same time has no obvious social-realist ambitions, and which arguably stands in a relation of Otherness to both heritage (understood in the broadest sense of that term) and social realism, offering as it does a different way of thinking about the relation between national identity and the land. Generally located within fantasy-based genres such as science fiction or horror (although its presence can be detected elsewhere as well), it is a landscape suffused with a sense of profound and sometimes apocalyptic anxiety; it is also a landscape of a comprehensive dispossession and vacancy. It might best be thought of as the British anti-landscape, the landscape that provocatively throws into question the very idea of the human/national subject as the owner of landscape, as a figure in that landscape, or as an observer of it. An emphasis on the alterity of the landscape itself effectively displaces individual and social agency – and with it the stories told by social realists that take great care to situate their characters within a recognizable landscape – with the human either completely disappearing or becoming subject to uncontrollable impulses or compulsions, or regressing to something less than human. This is not a landscape where we find ourselves as modern national subjects; it is instead a landscape where that sense of identity is diminished or removed entirely. Notions of the past are often invoked here, although it tends to be a more distant past – mediaeval or prehistoric – than that evoked by heritage drama. One consequence is that cityscapes can sometimes be transformed in an uncanny fashion into landscapes through regression to a pre-modern condition. However, for all the importance of notions of history within this type of location, it is anxieties about modernity and modern social change that arguably explain its appearance. In a curious way, prospects of the future lead inexorably to fantasies about the past and about annihilation of the national self.

The abandoned landscape

There is a peculiarly English moment in the 1954 BBC television serial *Quatermass II* in which the intrepid scientist-hero Professor Bernard

Quatermass, exploring the wreckage of a village that has recently been bulldozed to make way for the construction of a mysterious refinery, finds a battered and discarded sign that reads 'Ivy Cottage'. This poignant marker of a rural idyll now irrevocably lost is schematically juxtaposed by the programme with the spectacle provided by the shiny modern surfaces and new technologies of the refinery itself (which in both the television serial and the film adaptation that followed in 1956 was actually the Shell Haven Refinery in Essex; the Ivy Cottage scene was not included in the film version). The wrecked village that once housed Ivy Cottage functions in this instance as a comforting memory of a mode of community-based social organization that is seen as being in organic harmony with nature and which might once have stood as an image of the nation itself. By contrast, the refinery offers only anomie and social dissociation, peopled as it is by mindless guards (described in both the original television serial and in the film as 'zombies') and a quarrelsome, disorganized industrial workforce. The broader landscape through which Quatermass moves is also marked by the advanced depredations of a particular type of modernity upon all that is traditional and 'natural'. The rural area surrounding the refinery is bleak, denuded and festooned with 'No Entry' signs; when a working-class family ventures in to picnic at their usual site, they are ruthlessly machine-gunned to death by the guards (another scene which is missing from the film version). As if in response to this loss of a traditional social order, the nearby new town inhabited by the workers, some of whom presumably were displaced from the village, seeks to function as a meaningful community in its own right, with its social hall containing posters that self-consciously reference a wartime collectivity. But this collectivity is ultimately revealed as false and misleading, with the workers' morbid suspicion of outsiders transformed into an irrational, mob-like expression of violence.

In the case of *Quatermass II*, the alienated rural landscape turns out to be, quite literally, 'alienated'. Extraterrestrial organisms have been infecting and taking over humans, and the refinery has been constructed at their will to house yet more alien organisms. On his return to London, Quatermass discovers that alien-controlled humans have also been placed strategically at the centres of power – in the government and in the police force – in order to facilitate the alien invasion of Earth. While this scenario might well invoke Cold War anxieties about the threat of communist infiltration, it arguably makes more sense to view it as engaging primarily with domestic issues. This is particularly so given that British cinema and television of the 1950s and 1960s generally made very little of 'the communist threat' and often reflected a sense of ideological displacement or distance from a US-Russian superpower conflict.⁸ What is significant here is that the urban-based institutions of the state are depicted as already so de-humanized that non-human subversions of them pass relatively unnoticed. Only in the wrecked village, and in the countryside surrounding it, is the alien threat truly visible.

From this perspective, *Quatermass II* seems to rely upon a crude but still pervasive dichotomy that posits the forces of modernity as antithetical to all that is traditional and natural, with this often mapped onto stories of the

community-centred countryside being threatened by the anomic disruptions of the city, stories that take on a particular resonance in the twentieth century as the sense of living in a world transformed by technological advances, urban development and increased state control becomes ever more unavoidable. Of course, this is not unique to British culture; for example, one of the ways in which urban dystopias are rendered dystopic in films as various as *Metropolis* (1927), *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Minority Report* (2002) is through their suppression of 'natural' and implicitly pre-technological modes of human interaction, with the happy endings of the original release version of *Blade Runner* (but not the bleaker director's cut that appeared a few years later) and *Minority Report* pointedly located in the unspoilt countryside. However, while the British version of this can be related to what is going on elsewhere, it does possess distinctive qualities of its own, qualities that derive from, among other things, the changing role of the state in British life, the introduction of new technology, a strong cultural attachment to the rural-pastoral and the village as ideal community, and an associated sense that particular traditional values and social structures are being eroded. In the late 1940s and 1950s, such changes are dramatized in rural locations (in *Quatermass II*, for example) but also in urban ones. Even in fictions dealing with the modern city, one can sometimes detect a sense that localized urban communities are becoming attenuated and endangered, with consequences for the way in which urban dwellers think of themselves as national subjects.

For example, the main location in *Passport to Pimlico* is Miramont Place, which to all intents and purposes functions as an enclosed village-like community within the city, a community in which everyone knows everyone else and where there is an established social hierarchy. (The word 'miramont' means mountain views, and in its invoking of nature Miramont Place can be aligned with Ivy Cottage in *Quatermass II*.) In the course of the narrative, that community becomes threatened – by the agencies of the British state and, more worryingly for the film-makers, by a capitalist materialism unfettered by community control that sees Miramont Place filled with seething crowds of spivs and black marketeers.⁹ References to the recent experiences of World War Two abound; as Andrew Higson has noted, a number of post-war Ealing productions, including *Passport to Pimlico*, 'go to great lengths to reproduce the wartime conditions of siege and insularity and to assert and explore the idea of community, represented by a proliferation of narrative protagonists and a multiplication of incidental narrative lines'.¹⁰ A sense of the nation as a community was an important and potent concept in war-time propaganda – propaganda to which Ealing Studios itself was a significant contributor – but in *Passport to Pimlico* the emphasis on community has become defensive and regressive, a way of holding onto the past rather than engaging with the future, and the film's conclusion, in which the community willingly foregoes its 'independent' status, studiously avoids the anxieties invoked by the narrative.

As Tony Williams has noted, the plot of *Passport to Pimlico* bears comparison with the plot of the television serial *Quatermass and the Pit*, the 1959 sequel to *Quatermass II*.¹¹ In both, excavations in London lead to the discovery of objects

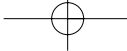
from the past – treasure in *Passport to Pimlico*, a Martian spaceship in *Quatermass and the Pit* – that transform the identity of the people living nearby, from British to Burgundian in *Passport to Pimlico* and from British to Martian in *Quatermass and the Pit*. *Quatermass and the Pit* is considerably bleaker, however. There is no Miramont-like community to speak of at the site of the excavation, just a series of deserted houses and a few individuals (an elderly couple, the local policeman) with memories of the way things used to be; and they are soon displaced by a mindless mob – the Quatermass version of the alienating crowds that take over Miramont Place – that roams the streets of London instinctively re-enacting a Martian racial purge. This mindlessness, and the associated transformation of the community into the mob or swarm (which is also apparent in *Quatermass II*), registers a diminution of the human presence in and control over the environment that is apparent in both urban and rural settings, although it is more noticeable and therefore generally more shocking in the rural landscape.

As with *Passport to Pimlico*, the Quatermass television stories (which also include *The Quatermass Experiment* in 1953) portray the growing role of the state in the everyday life of the British citizen. Community-based social organizations are displaced in favour of impersonal and anonymous social interactions that are often mediated by bureaucrats (in *Passport to Pimlico*) or experts (of which Professor Quatermass himself is a prime example), although in the Quatermass stories this is coupled with a sense that this process has now become entrenched and institutionalized.¹² One consequence is that while some of the social conflicts that formed part of the 1950s context of Quatermass do feature in the stories, they do not register as events emerging from meaningful social interaction but instead are given as arbitrary and inexplicable, or rather as only explicable by reference to some baleful non-human influence. So in *Quatermass II*, the dissatisfaction of the workers with the new managerial regime is displaced onto a human/alien conflict, while in *Quatermass and the Pit* it is implied that the race riots mentioned at the beginning are caused by racial instincts inherited from the Martians. On one level, this type of manoeuvring involves a deeply conservative approach to pressing social problems, and the ‘mystical pessimism’ associated with the work of Nigel Kneale, writer of all the Quatermass stories, undoubtedly has a conservative quality to it.¹³ However, the theme of alien invasion also permits the expression of a sense of displacement, of an emptying out of landscapes and cityscapes as the human-communal – and by extension the national – is drained away.

While the encroachments of the state register as gradual erosions of a traditional way of life in the post-World War Two period, the threat posed by new technologies is often figured in apocalyptic terms. The principal thematic difference between *Quatermass and the Pit* and *Passport to Pimlico* is the former’s emphasis on those new technologies (and an accompanying de-emphasizing of economic fears and anxieties). All three of the 1950s Quatermass stories come replete with the science-fiction paraphernalia of rockets and other startlingly modern technological artefacts that, as the Ivy Cottage reference in *Quatermass II* demonstrates, are juxtaposed against

traditional forms of social organization associated with a 'natural' order. At the same time, however, these technologies offer a competing conceptualization of nature, one that with varying degrees of explicitness is rooted in a sense of nuclear power. Monstrous mutations produced, usually accidentally, by nuclear test explosions were a regular feature of 1950s science fiction cinema. While the Quatermass stories avoid this particular generic convention, they do contain discussions of nuclear technology and, in addition, their linking of images of new technology with images of a gross and abject nature operating outside of human control clearly has a nuclear dimension, with processes of mutation and biological assimilation leading inevitably to apocalyptic threats to humankind.¹⁴ So in the television version of *The Quatermass Experiment* the astronaut inside the rocket that crashes on Wimbledon Common is infected by an alien life form that eventually mutates him into a grotesque alien creature whose gross reproductivity threatens the Earth; in *Quatermass II* the invading organisms concealed inside the refinery are themselves grotesque and shapeless, with their food – which is poisonous to humans – leaving an excremental smear across the refinery's antiseptic surfaces; while in *Quatermass and the Pit* the Martian spacecraft discovered in Knightsbridge, which contains the messily rotting bodies of giant insects, is a testament to a Martian scientific meddling with human nature.

Scenes depicting a loss of human control (not just in the Quatermass stories but elsewhere in British film and television) are often coupled with images of abandoned landscapes where that abandonment is caused by either hubristic scientific meddling with natural processes or nature's own hostility to humankind. The bluntest expression of the nuclear landscape comes in the form of two controversial BBC television productions, *The War Game* (1965) and *Threads* (1984), which adopt an overpoweringly harrowing documentary-like approach to conveying the horrors of the post-nuclear conflict world. Subtler treatments of the nuclear threat can be found in *Seven Days to Noon* (1950) and *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961), both of which offer eerie scenes of urban desertion as London faces imminent destruction, in the first film from a renegade scientist, in the second as a consequence of superpower nuclear tests knocking the Earth off its axis and sending it towards the sun.¹⁵ By contrast, *The Damned* (1962), a science-fiction film about a secret government project to prepare for life after nuclear war, makes chilling use of largely deserted coastal locations – situated within which are a series of distorted and disturbing sculptures by Elizabeth Frink (narratively legitimized by one of the film's characters being a sculptor) – to suggest a bleak landscape that is at once post-holocaust and post-human. Nuclear power is replaced by bio-engineered nature in the BBC television series *Survivors* (1975-7) and in the zombie-horror film *28 Days Later* (2002), in both of which a biological pathogen escapes from a laboratory to wreak havoc on the human race and empty out both urban and rural landscapes. Meanwhile, nature itself, untouched by scientific experiment, provides the threat in *X – The Unknown* (1956), in which a shapeless radioactive monster emerges from a bleak Scottish landscape, and in *The Day of the Triffids* (1962; also adapted for television by the BBC in 1981), which depicts a London largely deserted as the combination of a meteorite



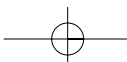
storm that blinds everyone who sees it with the growth of deadly ambulatory plants brings about the overthrow of humanity.

It follows that abandoned or alienating landscapes and cityscapes articulate, usually in a coded way, a variety of social fears and anxieties – ranging from anxieties about unfettered trade and new patterns of consumption in *Passport to Pimlico*, through Cold War nuclear fears, to a more recent focus on highly contagious viral diseases. The human presence in these landscapes is shown to be diminished through the loss of individuality within a homogenous, instinctive crowd or through the absence of humans altogether (with films and television programmes often combining the two: for example, the opening scenes of urban abandonment in *28 Days Later* eventually give way to scenes depicting the infected ‘crazies’ rampaging through the streets). While scenes involving dehumanized crowds fit quite easily into some of the more broadly negative ways of representing the city and the modernity it represents, scenes of urban abandonment are perhaps more unusual and striking, if only because they are unexpected. Conversely, people-free rural landscapes are not so unusual but can themselves be rendered alienating through their bleakness (see *Quatermass II*, *X – The Unknown* or *The Damned*) and, sometimes, through their ‘natural’ antipathy to the human, with this most powerfully expressed via the radioactive landscape of the nuclear-anxiety narrative. In all these cases and in all these places, it seems, the locals are no longer welcome in their own land.

Savage, pagan and ancient landscapes

In a discussion of cinematic constructions of Britishness, Andrew Higson observes ‘the slippage from the South Country to England, from England to Britain, from urban to rural, from class antagonism to patrician authority, and thence to organic community, and from the interests of one class to the national interest’.¹⁶ One way of resisting such a conceptualization of Britishness is through emphasizing the urban experience (as many social-realist films do). Other forms of resistance focus critically upon the rural itself, either deconstructing it in the manner of Greenaway or Keiller, or emotively rendering it as a disturbing and alienating location. This often involves moving away from the South-East to the geographical fringes of England (Cornwall, for example), or leaving England entirely for Scotland or Wales or islands off the coast. All of these provide locations for nasty stories about the countryside and what happens to outsiders – usually urbanities who provide figures of identification even when they themselves are not especially attractive – who venture there. This negation of positive rural values counters a tendency apparent in much British film and television of figuring the countryside in more conventional terms as a site of peaceful repose to which one retires in order to escape the bruising instabilities of the modern metropolis.¹⁷

One awful thing that can happen to the countryside happens in *Quatermass II*; it is invaded from outside by modernity. But *Quatermass II* also suggests another possibility, that something awful is already in the countryside, that



nature itself has the capacity to be threatening. This is not just the Darwinian struggle between species routinely invoked by alien invasion fantasies; it also involves a sense of the biological – whether manifested in plant, insect or viral/bacterial form, or just as a series of natural processes – as something that can topple the human from a position of mastery. Importantly, this negative portrayal of the countryside can spill over into the way in which the rural population is depicted. Far from representing an idyllic social constancy, country folk are instead sometimes revealed as decidedly primitive and altogether too close to nature, with rural traditions themselves involving a deeply unhealthy insularity and stasis.

In the most extreme, if comical, British examples of the savage-rural, rural inhabitants turn out to be literally bestial, i.e. werewolves. Both *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) and *Dog Soldiers* (2002) feature urbanites – American tourists in the former, soldiers on a training exercise in the latter – who stumble across rural landscapes that hide unspeakable secrets known only to the locals. Closeness to nature is equated with the savagery of the beast or werewolf, and the *Quatermass II* 'Ivy Cottage' reference is displaced by 'The Slaughtered Lamb', the deeply inhospitable country inn visited by the tourists in *American Werewolf*. Comparable bestial behaviour can be found in Sam Peckinpah's notorious Cornish-set *Straw Dogs* (1971), in which outsiders are threatened by the violence of local villagers, and in the BBC production *Rainy Day Women* (1984), which takes as its subject the sexual harassment and violence directed at land girls by rural dwellers during World War Two. The emphasis in some of these narratives on an essentially masculine bestiality and degradation reflects both the 'backwardness' of local communities in which the women tend to be assigned to mute subservience and an undeniably stereotypical but still pervasive sense that men have a greater capacity to be beasts (although a female rural werewolf does feature in *Dog Soldiers* as well as in *Dr Terror's House of Horrors*, a 1965 British portmanteau horror film).¹⁸

The savage or beastly rural landscape is usually a negative landscape as viewed from the perspective of the modern city dweller, but British film and television offers other modulations of the 'primitive' that are both more ambiguous about the relationship between modernity and tradition and potentially more challenging to ideas of British national identity constructed upon notions of the rural. One thinks here of representations of rural Britain 'in which the landscape and cultural practices of the land were imbued with pre-Christian paganism'.¹⁹ Paganism as belief-system does not feature in any significant way in British cinema or television until the late 1960s: before then, Stonehenge makes a fleeting appearance in the horror film *The Night of the Demon* (1957) but only as an atmospheric backdrop to a story that makes little or nothing of the pagan itself. However, Leon Hunt has identified the period 1966–1976 as one in which a more developed idea of the pagan-rural appears in British cinema: 'Magic's prime locale was now the countryside, the site of superstition, savagery and puritan cruelty ... or a more "authentic" and liberating set of cultural practices and beliefs'.²⁰ Both Hunt and Tanya Krzywinska link films such as *The Witches* (1966), *Cry of the Banshee* (1970),

Blood on Satan's Claw (1970) and *The Wicker Man* (1973) to a broader counter-cultural fascination with alternative values and lifestyles. The verdant countryside becomes a residuum of old beliefs that have survived the modernization and urbanization of British society and which in various ways challenge modern social norms. In contemporary-setting films such as *The Witches* and *The Wicker Man*, this challenge is articulated via encounters with representatives of the modern world, the schoolmistress (Joan Fontaine) in *The Witches* and the police officer (Edward Woodward) in *The Wicker Man*. In both cases, the prissiness of these characters contrasts with the more positive treatment of the urban outsider found in the savage-rural films and arguably reflects a dissatisfaction, expressed tentatively in *The Witches* and enthusiastically in *The Wicker Man*, with what is presented as a constrained and inflexible modern world-view. The resistance to this world-view can be led by rebellious women (in *The Witches*, *Cry of the Banshee* and *Blood on Satan's Claw*), or by young people questioning the values of their elders (in *Cry of the Banshee* and *Blood on Satan's Claw*), but generally it is assigned a rationale or philosophical basis that separates it out from the unmitigatedly bestial behaviour found elsewhere in negative portrayals of the rural and which speaks of a guarded attraction to pagan values.²¹

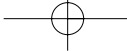
Part of that attraction arguably connects with the well-established idea of the countryside as the site of a traditional way of life, although here the tradition in question remains secret and illicit. Continuity, and an associated sense of cultural rootedness and history, is an important element in definitions of national identity, especially at times when particular notions of national identity are under threat, and that continuity is often found in the rural. 1980s heritage drama has already been mentioned in this regard. One might also cite numerous World War Two British films that discover the 'essence' of Britishness in an agrarian past. Notable in this respect is Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), a film that draws parallels between modern pilgrims visiting Kent and Chaucer's pilgrims, with the modern pilgrims' eventual identification with the rural-traditional a key feature of the film's propagandistic and nationalistic address. At the same time, however, *A Canterbury Tale* contains troubling elements, most obviously the Glueman, a mysterious figure – later revealed as the local magistrate – who roams the countryside pouring glue into wayward young women's hair in an attempt to protect the rural-traditional way of life from modern social mores. The Glueman did not go down well with British film critics of the 1940s. However, his obsessive-compulsive behaviour suggests another more disturbing aspect of tradition and continuity, namely a reliance on repetition, with present actions miming what has gone before.²² If an awareness of tradition involves locating one's actions in relation to a historical past, repetition of that past can entail a threatening loss of identity in the present.

This idea is taken up by a cluster of rural-based narratives – including the BBC television drama *The Stone Tape* (1972) and the ITV television serials *The Owl Service* (1969; adapted from Alan Garner's novel), *Children of the Stones* (1977) and *Quatermass* (1978; known in some markets as *The Quatermass Conclusion*) – that represent ancient landscapes where humans are compelled

to repeat actions from a distant history, either real or mythological, in a manner that effaces not just human agency but also modernity itself as a social force. A key text here is the aforementioned *Quatermass and the Pit* (written by Nigel Kneale, who was also responsible for *The Stone Tape* and *Quatermass*) in which the discovery of a five-million-year-old Martian spacecraft leads to the realization that Martians intervened at an early stage in the evolutionary development of humankind in order to implant their own instincts and values. The narrative concludes with an unwilling mass re-enactment of a Martian racial purge in the streets of London as the city itself, and its state-bureaucratic and technological systems, is brought to ruin.

Of particular importance in later treatments of this theme is the idea of megalithic history, with megalithic standing stones featuring prominently in *Children of the Stones* (which uses the famous stones at Avebury, Wiltshire as a prime location) and *Quatermass* (where it was originally intended that Stonehenge be used, although this idea was abandoned for logistical reasons) and also appearing at the climax of *The Stone Tape*. As is the case with *Quatermass and the Pit*, these stories depict scientists, the creatures of modernity, investigating mysterious phenomena only to find that science is unable to save them in the face of an immensely powerful compulsion to repeat long-past events. In *The Stone Tape*, which takes place in a country house, a team of scientists stumble upon a history of hauntings, a history that they are able to explain away as the by-product of a stone ring in the house – the stone tape of the title – acting as a recording medium. However, this confident assertion of rational (and implicitly masculine) knowledge is overturned when a female scientist inadvertently ‘plays’ the stone tape and becomes the latest in a long line of sacrifices at what is revealed to be an ancient stone construction described by the writer Nigel Kneale as ‘a proto-Stonehenge’.²³

Ancient sacrifice, and an attendant collapse in modern rationality, is also important in *Quatermass* and *Children of the Stones*. In *Quatermass*, which is the most apocalyptic of all the *Quatermass* stories, thousands of young people are drawn towards sites of ancient worship – most notably rings of standing stones – at which they are absorbed into mysterious beams of light and are never seen again. The young believe they are being transported to a better place, but Professor Quatermass discovers that in fact they are being disintegrated in order that trace elements valuable to a distant alien force can be extracted; as the Professor puts it, ‘The human race is being harvested’. Significantly, it is clear that this has happened before; the standing stones mark sites touched in the distant past by an alien influence that still has the power to influence people in the contemporary world. As was the case with *Quatermass and the Pit*, the tendency in *Quatermass* to blame social rebellion on an alien influence does have distinctly reactionary qualities. However, *Quatermass* also presents an eradication of modernity achieved through a massive act of compulsive repetition, one derived from a pre-modern past rooted firmly in notions of the rural (with this also apparent in the London-set *Quatermass and the Pit*, in which much is made of the pre-modern rural history of the part of London where the Martian spacecraft is discovered).

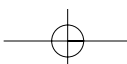


Reproducing the link between the socially primitive and the child-like made by Freud in 'The Uncanny', *Quatermass* renders its young people more susceptible than the older generation to irrational repetitive behaviour, with the programme's most extraordinary scene depicting Wembley Stadium full of these young victims-to-be mindlessly chanting a nursery rhyme just before they are all disintegrated.²⁴ The rhyme – 'Huffity Puffity Ringstone Round' – refers to a circle of standing stones where an alien beam has already struck, but it also offers us a picture of the modern stadium itself transformed into an ancient site of sacrifice.

Children of the Stones is somewhat gentler, reflecting its status as a serial designed primarily for children, but it tells a comparable story. A village surrounded by standing stones, a mysterious squire whose house marks a convergence of ley lines, and an old painting that portrays villagers being transformed into stones by a beam directed at them from the sky: this is the organic, tradition-bound rural community into which a scientist and his son move. As with the *Quatermass* stories, the explanation they develop for the various mysteries with which they are confronted combines scientific concepts – here to do with magnetic fields and the immense power of black holes – with more mystical ideas. It seems that the village was the site of a Druidical experiment in the purification of the human spirit that went badly wrong, an experiment that is endlessly being repeated in what in effect is a kind of time loop. *Children of the Stones* explicitly links repetition both with rural traditions and, more nightmarishly, with a constant return to situations which appear on the surface to be different each time but which essentially are the same. Characters who die in the course of the narrative – the squire, a local eccentric – reappear at the end although with different sets of character traits than before and no apparent memory of their previous selves. Similarly, people that we see transformed into standing stones – as depicted in the old painting – are restored to life, as if nothing has happened. The only characters who seem to be aware of the truth are the scientist and his son who both finally escape from the village just as the revived squire arrives. Ostensibly this sets out a straightforward division between the timelessness of tradition – here associated with what in effect is death-in-life – and the forward movement associated with science and modernity. However, it has earlier been made clear that the old painting, that has predicted key events in the narrative, also shows an adult male and a young man escaping from the beam of light. The escape of the scientist and his son fulfils that prophecy; the characters are literally in the picture, and *Children of the Stones* strongly implies that they too are part of this cyclical story and will be back before long.

Conclusion: Our land?

Definitions of Englishness and Britishness often deploy particular notions of rural and urban landscape. This article has identified a series of landscapes and cityscapes in British films and television programmes from the post-World War Two period that trouble such definitions, especially so far as the ownership of the land is concerned. This challenge rarely takes the form of a



fully developed critical analysis – we are talking about popular entertainment texts here whose concerns lie elsewhere – but instead suggests in a more intuitive way that the relationship between the people and the land is complex and fraught with uncertainty. This often involves an inversion of some of the socio-cultural binarisms associated with the terms rural/urban and tradition/modernity. Modernity can invade the rural – as it does in *Quatermass II* – but the rural strikes back in unexpected ways (and modernity, although usually overwhelmed, is not always the villain here). In these fictions, tradition might well stand for a certain kind of historical stability rooted firmly in the rural but it can also at the same time involve compulsive repetition, atavistic regression and the comprehensive displacement of the people from the land. The context within which such fictions appear is clearly one marked by widespread social change and disruptions of established models of national identity, and the fictions themselves register, often in an apocalyptic manner, some of the anxieties emerging from the modernization of Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. 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.

I would like to thank Charlotte Brunson, Elayne Chaplin and Ysanne Holt for their extremely helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

Notes

- 1 Key discussions of heritage drama include Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', in Lester Friedman, ed., *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, London: UCL Press, 1993, pp.109-29; Andrew Higson, 'The heritage film and British cinema', in Higson, ed., *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, London: Cassell, 1996, pp.232-48; John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 73-98. Claire Monk provides an insightful critical overview of heritage debates in 'The British heritage-film debate revisited', in Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant, eds., *British Historical Cinema*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp.176-98.
- 2 Jonathan Romney cited in Paul Dave, 'The Films of Patrick Keiller', in Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson, eds., *British Cinema, Past and Present*, London: Routledge, 2000, p.341.
- 3 For discussions of this, see the essays collected in Monk and Sargeant, eds., *British Historical Cinema*.
- 4 The phrase 'city of dreadful delight' is taken from Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, London: Virago, 1992.
- 5 Amy Sargeant, 'Making and selling heritage culture: style and authenticity in historical fictions on film and television', in Ashby and Higson, eds., *British Cinema, Past and Present*, pp.301-15.
- 6 Robert Murphy, 'Citylife: Urban Fairy-tales in Late 90s British Cinema', in Robert Murphy, ed., *The British Cinema Book*, 2nd edition, London: British Film Institute, 2001, p.297.
- 7 Claire Monk has recently offered an interesting critique of those accounts of 1980s British cinema organized around what she sees as a simplistic dichotomy between the heritage film and social realist cinema. Monk, 'The British heritage-film'.
- 8 See Peter Hutchings, "'We're the Martians now": British Sf invasion fantasies of the 1950s and 1960s', in I.Q. Hunter, ed., *British Science Fiction Cinema*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp.33-47.
- 9 For a relevant discussion of *Passport to Pimlico*, see Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, Newton Abbot, Devon: David & Charles, 1977, pp.94-107.

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- 10 Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p.268.
- 11 Tony Williams, 'The repressed fantastic in *Passport to Pimlico*', in Wheeler Winston Dixon, ed., *Re-viewing British Cinema, 1900-1992*, New York: State University of New York, 1994, pp.95-106. *Quatermass and the Pit* was adapted for the cinema in 1967.
- 12 For a discussion of the Quatermass serials, see Hutchings, "'We're the Martians now'"; and Paul Wells, 'Apocalypse Then: the ultimate monstrosity and strange things on the coast ... an interview with Nigel Kneale', in Hunter, ed., *British Science Fiction Cinema*, pp.48-56.
- 13 I.Q. Hunter, 'The Day the Earth Caught Fire', in Hunter, ed., *British Science Fiction Cinema*, p.110.
- 14 Sue Harper and Vincent Porter connect this abject reproductivity with gender-specific anxieties: 'it is the organism's capacity for exponential reproduction which causes panic in the (male) populace ... The monster is a female Proteus, and an index of unconscious fears of the vagina and of the birth process': *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.145. Such anxieties are undoubtedly expressed in these films, although I would argue that they are intertwined with nuclear anxieties that are foregrounded by the narratives themselves.
- 15 For contextualizations of these films, see Stephen Guy, "'Someone presses a button and it's goodbye Sally': *Seven Days to Noon* and the threat of the atomic bomb", in Alan Burton, Tim O'Sullivan and Paul Wells, eds., *The Family Way: The Boulting Brothers and British Film Culture*, Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000, pp.143-54; and Hunter, 'The Day the Earth Caught Fire'.
- 16 Higson, *Waving the Flag*, p.44.
- 17 However, that repose can in itself offer resistance to modernity. See in this respect Christine Geraghty's account of rural opposition to modernity in 1950s British film in *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp.38-54.
- 18 *Straw Dogs* and *An American Werewolf in London* were directed by US directors, had US financial backing and featured US stars. This in itself should not exclude them from a discussion of British film, so long as one acknowledges that British cinema often has an international quality to it. It is significant in this respect that both *Straw Dogs* and *American Werewolf* deploy a sense of the British landscape that is apparent elsewhere in British cinema, in the work of British and non-British film-makers. At the same time, however, it is worth noting that the idea of the savage-rural landscape is more developed in post-1960s US cinema, especially in its horror sector, than it is in British cinema of the same period. Films such as *Deliverance* (1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Race with the Devil* (1975), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), and more recent horrors such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Cabin Fever* (2002), *Wrong Turn* (2003) and the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003) all depict urban complacency receiving its comeuppance from savage nature in a manner that is comparable with the British version - although the British version's attachment to the rural-pastoral and to the idea of the village does appear to be nationally distinctive.
- 19 Tanya Krzywinska, *A Skin For Dancing In: Possession, Witchcraft and Voodoo in Film*, Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000, p.74.
- 20 Leon Hunt, 'Necromancy in the UK: witchcraft and the occult in British horror', in Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley, eds., *British Horror Cinema*, London: Routledge, 2002, p.84.
- 21 For a discussion of the anti-authoritarian attitudes apparent generally in British horror cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s see Peter Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994, pp.159-85.
- 22 On *A Canterbury Tale*, see Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate, *Best of British: Cinema and Society 1930-1970*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, pp.43-60; Andrew Moor, 'No Place Like Home: Powell, Pressburger, Utopia', in Murphy, ed., *The British Cinema Book*, pp.109-15.
- 23 Contained on Kneale's commentary track for the British Film Institute DVD release of *The Stone Tape*.
- 24 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *Freud, Art and Literature: The Penguin Freud Library Volume 14*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, pp.335-76.