The Pestilence in the Ditch:
Landscapes in Contemporary British Film Culture

Lawrence Jackson

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Abstract

This thesis argues that certain British films of the first two decades of the twenty-first century are defined by their atmospheres of unease, and that these atmospheres grow out of the films' bold and distinctive treatment of landscape. This approach to landscape simultaneously builds upon and differs from that of past British cinema, because of its association with a sustained tone of alienation, disenfranchisement and intensity. Focusing principally on the films of Andrea Arnold, Clio Barnard, Paddy Considine, Shane Meadows and Ben Wheatley, which together constitute a shadow strain of contemporary British cinema, my thesis uses the concepts of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic to investigate the landscapes of British film culture in the new century. An introductory section looks at the relation of these contemporary screen landscapes to earlier cinematic and literary traditions, working to build up a methodology for the exploration which follows of the storytelling modes of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic. Films which utilise, subvert or renew each mode are then explored in detail, facilitating a discussion of their shared aesthetic stance of rebellion. The objective of the filmmakers' stance is to avoid the falsification of history, and instead to embody authenticity. In their use of landscape, the films cross thresholds between the modes of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic, and so redefine these modes in the context of twenty-first century British cinema. This thesis asks, how and why do these contemporary British films locate tension within the landscape? It argues that in so doing they hold a mirror up to past, present and future Britain, creating a new space, which is a British anti-landscape.

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Eerie-Pastoral-Heritage-Epic

INTRODUCTION

THE PESTILENCE IN THE DITCH



A Field in England (Ben Wheatley, 2013)

A Minefield of the Psyche

Ten minutes before the ending of Andrea Arnold's 2011 version of *Wuthering Heights*, the camera follows Heathcliff (James Howson) across a lowering moor, to a place where he begins to dig frenziedly. Within the earth he uncovers the wooden coffin of his soul-mate Cathy (Kaya Scodelario) and, roaring with grief and frustration, tries to prise the lid off. Abruptly, he ceases and looks around him, as if he has been stopped in his efforts by the pitch of the wind and the swirling of leaves in the sky above the open grave. The film feels poised, as if the elements are intervening in his act of transgression.

This scene from *Wuthering Heights* intermingles passion, violence, death, transgression and nature. In this, it is typical of a recurrent tendency in certain British films of the first two decades of the twenty-first century to conjure a singular mood in relation to landscape. . This thesis takes as its subject those certain British films, and that singular mood. It is characterised by an underlying tension, created by a range of extreme contrasts which these films explore: between exhilaration and unease, epiphany and ordeal, lyricism and violence.

This thesis asks how, and why, do these British films of the new century choose to situate the tension generated by these contrasts within the landscape? As a means of framing the films' approach to landscape, it will employ the four key concepts of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic. In the arena of film studies, these concepts are currently used by filmmakers and scholars including Iain Sinclair, Stella Hockenhull, Andrew Higson and Andrew Elliot. The thesis differs in its treatment of these concepts, however, because it examines how the films develop them in two important ways. Firstly, they either subvert or renew them so that they become anti-eerie, anti-pastoral, anti-heritage and anti-epic, and consequently the films' treatment of them identifies as an act of aesthetic revolt. Secondly, the films rely upon the idea of these concepts as storytelling modes, thus underlining how they make innovative links between narrative traditions and contemporary landscapes. In this way, the films hold a mirror up to past, present and future Britain.

The films simultaneously celebrate and criticise so, aesthetically and narratologically speaking, there is a complexity in how they portray landscape. . Their sense of landscape grows out of an awareness of national myths and a desire to relocate them to a setting that effectively redraws the map of what Paul Newland calls an 'imagined countryside' (2016: 3-4). As Cathy's grave in *Wuthering Heights* signifies a borderland between life and death, so the screen spaces of twenty-first-century British film culture are depicted as liminal interzones. These spaces are identifiable as an area lying between the country and the city

which Marion Shoard calls ‘edgelands’ (2002). They represent what Richard Mabey calls the ‘unofficial countryside’ (2010), a phrase whichdescribes forgotten corners of nature that are closer to notions of the post-industrial than of the traditionally bucolic. They constitute overgrown or abandoned sites that are neither rural nor urban, but something else in between. They are often disorientating, fearful places, leaving the viewer to infer that these landscapes contain within them something menacing, even deadly, or that they are themselves malign. This sense of threat within the onscreen British landscape is articulated by film producer Lila Rawlings as ‘the pestilence in the ditch’ (2013). Rawlings’ recent credits include the Clio Barnard films *The Selfish Giant* (2013) and *Dark River* (2017), and she used the phrase, in an interview with the author about the use of landscape in past and present British film culture, to sum up the screenworks’ shared sense of landscape. In the context of this thesis, Rawlings’ phrase literally evokes a combination of disease, death, water, earth and nature, and functions as a metaphor for the peculiarly charged atmosphere of the landscapes of contemporary British film culture which this thesis considers .

Alongside its presence in *Wuthering Heights*, this pestilence is to be found in a film such as Shane Meadows’ *Dead Man’s Shoes* (2004), whose protagonist Richard (Paddy Considine) must return to his Midlands hometown to unearth, and then confront, the facts surrounding the death of his brother, hanged by a gang of intoxicated local crooks in a ruined castle on the skyline above the town. It is in Ben Wheatley’s *A Field in England* (2013), as the imprisoned necromancer O’Neil (Michael Smiley) is first encountered in a corner of the field, literally buried alive, awaiting the soldiers’ arrival to be freed. It is in *Dark River* , on the West Yorkshire farm where Joe (Mark Stanley) awaits the return of his sister Alice (Ruth Wilson) in the same location, now symbolically dilapidated, where as children both siblings suffered abuse at the hands of their late father (Sean Bean). In each film, the physical arrival at or return to a particular site signals the bringing to light of what has been repressed, resulting in

a moral reckoning that is physically violent. Place is inseparable from event, reflecting the films' central triangulation of place, time and story. The result is that the films' landscapes present metaphysical spaces through which human beings voyage, on journeys where they must risk and weather the consequences of setting off emotional depth charges. It is these landscapes which the thesis investigates.

Rawlings' phrase 'the pestilence in the ditch' is evocative in that it is at once recognisable, mysterious and haunting. Accordingly, I have chosen to structure my investigation of the landscapes of contemporary British cinema around the four key concepts of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic, which both define the films' treatment of space and reflect this notion of the pestilence in the ditch. These concepts are chosen because of their familiarity and resonance as significant modes of poetic and mythic storytelling, and because they offer four different facets of the strangeness and subversion inherent in the films' use of landscape. Eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic are all concepts contained within the idea of the pestilence in the ditch, because the phrase as a whole spans the uncanny, the rustic, the historical, and the breadth and scale of storytelling. The pestilence in the ditch is thus an appropriate phrase, but it requires significantly more nuance if we are to understand the role of space and place in these films. Therefore, , the idea of pestilence will be separated out into four concepts to better reflect the aesthetic ambition of the filmmakers.

Each of the four chosen concepts are storytelling modes which the films utilise,subvert and renew, sometimes alternating between all of them within a single film. As an illustration of this integrated approach, Chapter One will discuss how, in its use of abandoned rural and urban spaces, *Dead Man's Shoes* locates the eerie in its landscape. Yet, the sophistication of Meadows' handling of other elements , such as the rural idyll set within a modern post-industrial space, the uncompromising portrayal of the guilty history of a community and the tragic hero, also challenges notions of pastoral, heritage and epic. Eerie speaks to the

disconcerting and desolate presence of landscape in the films. It examines how familiar spaces, whether natural or man-made, such as woods, parks, housing estates and motorway service stations, become bleak and intimidating. This translates into a sense of the uncanny, of the familiar landscape being rendered unfamiliar. Pastoral speaks to the films' embrace of and ambivalence towards ideas of the lyrical and idyllic within landscape. It suggests a retreat from modernity in that it recalls a simpler, more primitive life where human beings lived at one with nature. At the same time, the films demonstrate awareness that such an existence is no longer possible in the post-industrial twenty-first century. Heritage speaks to their treatment of the legacy of a national cultural tradition. It looks at the perpetuation of a British or English self-image that relies on cliches, whether based in Shakespeare, Dickens or WWII, that are commodified and exported around the world. Yet, the films ask whether there is another, alternative heritage that has an equivalent if not greater currency than the commercial, commodified one. Epic might initially appear, as a storytelling mode preoccupied with landscape, as an anomaly compared to the preceding modes of eerie, pastoral and heritage. This is not the case, however, as the focus in Chapters Six and Seven on the *Red Riding* Trilogy (Julian Jarrold, James Marsh, Anand Tucker, 2009) and *Tyrannosaur* (Paddy Considine, 2011) demonstrates their reframing of mythic storytelling elements and the figure of the hero. Epic sets a narrative within a community, whether rural or urban, that is beset by a threat or conflict, and scrutinises the behaviour both of individuals within the community and of a hero or protagonist whose deeds elevate him or her above the others. Thus, a film such as *Tyrannosaur* recalls the epic mode, in its handling of theme and its situating of the hero figure in the context of society.

This introduction, and the subsequent chapters, will contribute to, inform and redirect the debate on the work of scholars who have considered the role of each storytelling mode in relation to British literary and cinematic culture of the past. Mark Fisher, in *Ghosts of My Life*

(2014) and *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), considers eerie in terms of contemporary cultural history, whereas this thesis links eerie explicitly with landscape. Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City* (1973), maps the pastoral tradition across centuries of British and English literature, whereas this thesis considers how the twenty-first century films of this study both refer to and dispense with this tradition. In the field of British film studies, Andrew Higson, John Hill, Claire Monk and others have debated and defined British heritage cinema, while this thesis argues that the landscapes of contemporary British film culture differ from received notions of heritage cinema and indeed point to an alternative heritage. Gilbert Highet, Paul Merchant and others have examined the classical tradition of the epic and contextualise its legacy, while this thesis considers the manifestation of aspects of the epic, such as the heroic narrative, in twenty-first century screen landscapes that initially appear anything but epic. It is notable, moreover, that these and other scholars to whose work this thesis will refer do not use the concepts of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic in the context of the landscapes of contemporary British cinema.

This thesis will argue that all the films under discussion are transgressive in character, and by employing the modes of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic it will analyse what it is that constitute their transgressive qualities. Chapter One on eerie will consider how the landscapes of *Dead Man's Shoes, The Hide* (Marek Losey, 2008), *Kill List* (Ben Wheatley, 2011) and *Catch Me* Daddy (Daniel Wolfe, 2014) manifest as uncanny, alienating spaces, creating a sense of the eerie in landscape. Alongside analysis of the films, the treatment of notions of the eerie by two contemporary television series will be addressed, one Apollonian (*Detectorists,* Mackenzie Crook 2014-17) and the other Dionysian (*The Living and the Dead,* Ashley Pharaoh 2016). The chapter will also reflect on the correlation between the use of eerie elements in both contemporary British film culture and examples of earlier British literature by Beatrix Potter and M.R. James.

Chapters Two and Three on pastoral will take forward Williams' argument that the idea of, and nostalgia for, an idyllic national past are based upon a falsification of history, and relate this to the commitment shown by the twenty-first century British films under discussion to authenticity and historical accuracy. It will reflect on the relevance to these contemporary films of the use of the pastoral mode in two late twentieth-century British films, Michael Reeves' *Witchfinder General* (1968) and Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo's *Winstanley* (1975), as well as, in the poetry of John Clare, again making a literary correlation that puts the films under consideration in a wider cultural context. It is worth acknowledging that many literary representations of the rural, in what is now the past, were far from idyllic, for example the work of William Cobbett and Thomas Hardy. These two chapters will analyse *A Field in England, The Selfish Giant* and *Dark River* as examples of contemporary films which utilise and finally reject the mode of pastoral, and they will argue that in so doing they establish a new mode, that of anti-pastoral.

Chapters Four and Five on heritage open with a detailed survey of how, in certain contemporary examples of commercial British cinema, ideas of nostalgia, tourism and heritage have been intertwined in relation to an imagined national past. It will then analyse two prominent examples of films which revolt against this received idea of heritage. *Wuthering Heights* depicts a nineteenth-century rural narrative without sentimentality or nostalgia. In *Sightseers* (Ben Wheatley, 2012), a numinous, primal attachment to the landscape manifests as an unconscious immersion in history, which this thesis terms dream heritage. The conclusion is that these films, and by extension the others of this study, take forward and mutate the idea of heritage cinema.

Chapters Six and Seven on epic begin with a consideration of mythic storytelling traditions and definitions of the epic in examples from world literature such as *The Iliad* and *Beowulf*. It then considers four contemporary British films which subvert the epic mode both in terms of

the scale of their storytelling and of their focus on twenty-first-century alternatives to the heroic figures of classical antiquity. These are the *Red Riding* trilogy and *Tyrannosaur* which, in their deeply flawed male protagonists and their setting within northern, post-industrial landscapes, enact a subversion of the epic. Ultimately, they identify as national anti-epics,

The title of this opening section of the Introduction is taken from a phrase by the art historian Christopher Neve. 'A minefield of the psyche' appropriately captures the distinctive relationship between landscape and psychology in contemporary British film culture which this thesis examines. Neve uses it in his writing on the psychic and physical charge carried by landscape, and refers to the belief of twentiety-century artist Paul Nash that historical sites mark 'many layers of occupation' (1990: 7) and that aspects of the natural environment such as roots, tree-trunks and hills constitute 'monuments in the landscape' (ibid: 7). Of Nash, he says: 'If he could now extend this principle so that almost any corner of a field or stretch of beach marked the site of some event buried alive, he could transfigure even the most inert countryside into a minefield of the psyche.' (ibid: 7). Nature writer Robert Macfarlane uses related concepts such as relic traces, shadow-sites and landscape ghosts to make a similar point that the landscape holds within it multiple traces of past activity. When applied to the contemporary British films which are the subject of this thesis, Neve's and Macfarlane's ideas connect with how the films use landscape as a manifestation of deeper concerns, effectively to represent a 'minefield of the psyche'.

Furthermore, the verb 'transfigure', used by Neve for the artist's role, is suggestive of magic. It links the artist with the necromancer characters considered in this thesis, such as the figure of the mythological Merlin , Colpeper (Eric Portman) in Powell and Pressburger's 1944 film *A Canterbury Tale*, and O'Neil in *A Field in England*. The connection between creativity, magic and landscape suggests that the artist's act of transfiguration is a bestowal of energy upon what appeared at first sight peaceful, pictorial and pastoral ('inert countryside', in

Neve's phrase). It is a catalytic process that reveals the landscape to be harnessing an explosive power ('a minefield') . Neve's view of British landscape artists of the twentieth century aligns with that of this thesis regarding British filmmakers of the twenty-first century:they are quasi-cartographers, motivated by a need to map 'some event buried alive'.

A Critique of the Present

In terms of methodology, this thesis will proceed partly via textual analysis of the films in question, and partially by combining theoretical insights from film studies with innovative explorations of landscape in literature (Williams) and hauntology (Fisher). Sections of this introduction and of the chapters that follow will move into myth, folklore and literature because the writers and artists which they consider, including Homer, Emily Bronte, Beatrix Potter, Rudyard Kipling, M.R.James and J.R.R.Tolkien, have been included because they offer essential context for an understanding of the approach to the landscapes of the contemporary British films under discussion.

This thesis concentrates predominantly on the films of five contemporary British directors whose work spans the first two decades of the new century: Andrea Arnold, Clio Barnard, Paddy Considine, Shane Meadows and Ben Wheatley. In addition to these filmmakers, it will also examinefilms directed by Julian Jarrold, Marek Losey, James Marsh, Anand Tucker and Daniel Wolfe. In chronological order, these core films are: *Dead Man's Shoes* , *Red Road* (Arnold, 2006), *The Hide* , *Fish Tank* (Arnold, 2009), The *Red Riding* Trilogy , *Kill List, Wuthering Heights* , *Tyrannosaur* , *Sightseers* , *A Field in England* , *The Selfish Giant* , *Catch Me Daddy* and *Dark River* . This group of contemporary British films, while superficially disparate, is firmly linked through their use of landscape. They have in common a balance of the following characteristics: they are broadly realist in tone and style. They are low-to-medium-budget, and would be marketed as arthouse rather than commercial cinema . They

are set in different time periods, from seventeenth century to nineteenth century to contemporary, and also share a complicated relationship with time. Finally, landscape is a powerful presence in each, combining one or more of the storytelling modes of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic.

An additional explanation of the selection of films in this thesis may be helpful. British films from earlier generations are analysed in cases in which it is argued that these have influenced the contemporary British films under discussion. Thus, older films such as *A Canterbury Tale*, *Witchfinder General* and *Winstanley* are considered in depth, because they stand out as films from the past which are in some sense *about* landscape, not just set in it, and which have informed discussion of this topic in contemporary film culture. Similar films such as *Akenfield* (Peter Hall, 1974) and *Comrades* (Bill Douglas, 1986) might be seen as meeting the same criteria, but are excluded from the discussion because they are more thematically driven rather than using particular storytelling modes in relation to landscape. As such they are beyond the scope of this thesis. There is discussion of work not only from film but from television, such as *The Living and the Dead*, *Detectorists* and The *Red Riding* trilogy. Again, these examples of television material are included because they exemplify contemporary British moving image culture that prioritises an engagement with questions of landscape. Their inclusion in this thesis is an acknowledgement of the porousness of disciplinary boundaries: in one context, *Red Riding* is a television series (although in the USA the films received individual theatrical releases), in another it constitutes British arthouse cinema. The films themselves invite an interpretation engaging with wider artforms, particularly literature – *Red Riding* was originally written as a quartet of novels - as will be examined in the later sections of this introduction.

If the films of this thesis belong to a tradition, it is that they are iconoclastic. They represent a shadow strain of British cinema, in that they are underexamined films that are worthy of

closer analysis. They signify a distinctive change, or break, with what has gone before, and are preoccupied with the importance of the new century as a turning-point aesthetically and culturally, reflected in their attitude towards landscape. These films are in the shadows, representing a Dionysian national cinematic tradition, and are very different from the roughly contemporaneous and better-known *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998), *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999), *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003), *Layer Cake* (Matthew Vaughn, 2004) and *Yesterday* (Danny Boyle, 2019). These films use locations both rural and urban with confidence, but in the service of commodifying them for national and overseas markets. Thus they lie outside the scope of this thesis. Also excluded are recent British films that might otherwise conform to the rationale as set out above and which show an affinity with landscape, but about which it is too soon to judge whether their makers are embarking on a wider conversation with storytelling modes within landscape in the committed sense that Arnold, Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley evidently are. These films include Hope Dickson Leach's *The Levelling* (2016), Francis Lee's *God's Own Country* (2017), and Rose Glass' *Saint Maud* (2019). The films upon which this thesis focuses present landscapes which align with notions of the uncanny, as articulated by Peter Hutchings:

> … 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. (2004: 29)

It is this British anti-heritage landscape, and its boundaries, that this thesis sets out to map. The films under discussion are permeated by this 'sense of profound and sometimes apocalyptic anxiety'. More recently, Hutchings revisited and developed his claim: '… the natural environment has been transformed into a site for anxiety, uncertainty and alienation. It haunts us, undermines our modern sensibilities, and diminishes or effaces us entirely as

figures in the landscape.' (2015) Hutchings' triangulation of the environment, the experience of feeling haunted, and contemporary British cinema, is key to the films under discussion, while a hinterland to them is provided by two debates in British film studies. The first concerns the polarity between the aesthetics of social realism on the one hand, and of more non-realist forms on the other; and the second relates to notions of heritage cinema.

In his essay 'The Lost Continent' in Charles Barr's collection *All Our Yesterdays*, Julian Petley summarises the former:

> One suspects that if the institution of the British cinema could be radically reconceptualised and wrested from the grasp of the still tenacious realist aesthetic, then the films discussed in this chapter would look less like isolated islands revealing themselves, and more like the peaks of a long submerged lost continent. (1986:118)

Petley's far from innocent employment of the words 'institution' and 'tenacious' implies something monolithic and outmoded about British cinema, to whose traditions he offers non-realist work, referred to as the 'films discussed in this chapter', by Ken Russell and Neil Jordan as an alternative. Crucially, Petley identifies the use of landscape as something under-utilised by filmmakers working in the realist tradition. This thesis argues that, in their use of landscape, contemporary British films like *Wuthering Heights* and *A Field in England* represent a long-awaited resurfacing of Petley's Lost Continent.

The second debate in British film studies relates to heritage cinema and was led by Andrew Higson in his 1996 essay 'The Heritage Film and British Cinema' where he maintains: 'One of the central pleasures of the heritage film is the artful and spectacular projection of an elite, conservative vision of the national past.' (1996: 233) Although the phrase 'heritage cinema' was coined by Charles Barr in his introduction to *All Our Yesterdays*, Higson repossesses it by making the contention that prominent British films of the 1980s and 90s such as

Merchant-Ivory's *A Room with a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987) and *Howards End* (1992*)* are 'all the product of a culture and an economy in which the heritage industry – the commodification of heritage, the commodification of the past – has become highly visible.' (ibid: 234) Higson describes the retrospective tone of heritage cinema: 'Nostalgia is always in effect a critique of the present, which is seen as lacking something desirable out of reach in the past.' (ibid: 238) His overall stance, from which phrases like 'conservative vision' and 'commodification' stand out, is inseparable from the political context of the time at which he was writing, namely close to the end of eighteen years of Conservative government in the UK, and as such his opposition to the heritage film is politically as well as aesthetically coloured. There is, however, a different question raised by Higson which this thesis aims to develop and address: 'This question "'who shall inherit England?'" is central to the heritage film … it is not a simple question, for it also raises questions about Englishness, and about the nature, shape and depth of England itself, its traditions and its topography.' (ibid: 239) In its linking of place and inheritance, this is a question as central to *Tyrannosaur* and *A Field in England* as to the heritage films of Higson's early study.

Beside Higson, the work of two other film scholars, John Hill and Claire Monk, has developed and reinvigorated the heritage debate. Hill, in his review of 1980s British cinema, makes the distinction that his is neither history nor account, but raises 'a number of themes and issues to which filmmaking in this period gives rise.' (1999: xi) His two primary themes are Thatcherism and the cinema's response to it through exploration of questions of identity. As with Higson, a major difference between Hill's approach and mine is dictated by the shift in political context: Hill is writing in 1999, in the first term of a landslide Labour government, looking back at a political and cultural landscape of nearly two decades previously which he argues came to be defined by the eleven years of Thatcher's premiership. Yet,unlike the British films of the 1980s which Hill maintains were in part a

direct response to that political landscape, British films of the new millennium embody different values from the political in a narrow, party-political sense, such as alienation, disenchantment and desensitisation. A broader socio-political reading might attribute these to a sense of public betrayals resulting from Blair's support of the Iraq War of 2003, the financial crash of 2008 and the lack of accountability of banks and big business which it revealed, and media complicity in these events. Such responses are reflected in a sequence of films not so much apolitical as depoliticised. Compared to the focused anti-Thatcher outrage of Stephen Frears' films *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammie and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), to which Hill gives particular attention, it is notable that contemporary films that could be described as similarly political in their attention to social processes, such as *Tyrannosaur* and *Catch Me Daddy*, appear to turn inwards emotionally rather than outwards sociologically. Unlike the films of Hill's survey, these films emphasise the personal over the political. This shift in emphasis, from outwards to inwards, is reflective of the changed landscapes of contemporary British films, whose spaces read as metaphysical extensions of the characters' psychologies. As a result, this thesis gives particular consideration to the idea of landscape as metaphor.

In her essay 'The British heritage-film debate revisited', Claire Monk understands the idea of British heritage cinema being a quasi-genre or mode of national filmmaking to be inherently problematic. Her project is to examine 'how the origins of the heritage-film idea and critique as a response to the specific cultural-political circumstances of the 1980s produce limitations.' (2002: 183) For Monk, central to these limitations is how the politics of the 1980s and 1990s, effectively the eighteen years of Conservative government to which a left-leaning critical establishment reacted by ascribing to the films of this period the attributes of Thatcherite propaganda for a lost British Empire, have been folded into a more general dismissal of each film's individual qualities. This in turn has led to their being

misremembered and, as it were, culturally misfiled. In a gesture to the realist-non-realist debate, and as an echo of Petley's idea of 'the institution of the British cinema' (1986: 118), Monk objects to what she sees as British film culture's 'notably binaristic and reductive evaluative framework' (2002: 184), consisting of the 'new orthodoxy' (ibid: 184) and 'imposed binarisms' (ibid: 185). In so doing she queries both that there is such a thing as a heritage cinema, and the criteria by which it has been judged. Monk's essay ends on a call for 'urgently needed new critical responses and debates' (ibid: 195), a call which has been answered in the recent work of David Forrest and Stella Hockenhull.

Forrest addresses the realism versus non-realism debate by proposing that the films of, among others, Arnold, Barnard and Meadows constitute a new realism, a mode that allows for porous aesthetic borders and which includes within it other related modes. Both Forrest and Hockenhull recognise Arnold as the ideal proponent of this new realism. Hockenhull says of Arnold's *Red Road*: 'Arnold's mise-en-scène includes striking imagery, at times seemingly surplus to narrative requirements. The landscape is presented as an image-driven means of explaining and emphasising Jackie's loneliness without fully explicating it.' (2017: 116) While Forrest argues that Arnold's 'use of stylistic and image-led features, as opposed to orthodox naturalistic, observational aesthetics, shows the manner in which new realist cinema in Britain is signalling a changing of priorities where the depiction of reality – while still central – is increasingly open to a broader range of approaches.' (2010: 41)

The concepts touched upon by both Hockenhull and Forrest recur throughout this thesis in its analysis of the films: it will consider the use of 'striking imagery' that seems 'surplus to narrative requirements', the presentation of landscape as an 'image-driven means of explaining and emphasising … without fully explicating', and a changing of priorities where the depiction of reality is open to 'a broader range of approaches'. Similarly, critical responses to these films have become more fluid, lateral and multi-layered. Such responses

are better equipped to appreciate the films' bold cross-pollination of styles, juxtaposition of urban and rural milieus and alternation of differing modes. This approach is evinced in Hockenhull's analysis of a scene from Arnold's *Fish Tank*:

> Arnold creates a romantic aesthetic at the outset, with Mia shown in silhouette set against the view from the flats. Far from introducing the area as the rundown housing estate that it is, Arnold cinematographically manipulates the mise en scène to create a scene of beauty, the camera bypassing the building in the foreground to prosaically observe the rural distance. (117)

Hockenhull articulates what is extraordinary about Arnold's aesthetic reach: the romantic aesthetic (the heroine in silhouette) is understood but the anti-romantic nature of the location (the 'rundown housing estate') simultaneously works against it, which results in taking the viewer to a new space that is shaped by the dynamic between romantic/rundown and poetry/prose. For Forrest, this new space belongs to the mode of new realism:

> By emphasising universal, experiential visual and aural reference points, and by calling on the spectator, through repetition, duration and other forms of enunciation, to dwell on these everyday phenomena, Arnold's work, in the spirit of new realism, makes lyrical that which is often ignored. (2020: 82)

In the contemporary British films of this study, what is fundamental to a consideration of their use of landscape is an understanding of what lies behind the phrases 'the beauty of otherwise maligned spaces', and work that 'makes lyrical that which is often ignored'. This is because many of these landscapesare post-industrial and therefore do not conform to conventional notions of beauty. The discussion of Tyrannosaur in Chapter Seven addresses this point. While Forrest's suggestion that Arnold's work 'makes lyrical that which is often ignored' can be applied as a principle not only to Arnold's films but to the others discussed in

this thesis, his aim is to fit diverse contemporary filmmakers into the category, or spirit, of new realism. However, for Arnold, Barnard and Meadows this mode is perhaps not that convenient a fit. Instead, in these filmmakers' work the numinous and the unconscious play as important a role as any realistic elements. In light of this, allying the films primarily with realism, as Forrest does, would be, I would argue, an underestimation of their aesthetic daring.

Linking to the scholarship of Hockenhull and Forrest, Charlotte Brunsdon's writing about contemporary British cinema describes filmmakers such as Arnold, Considine and Meadows as 'contributors to a twenty-first-century audio-visual landscape of desperation.' (2012: 474) Brunsdon's response to Monk's call for 'urgently needed new critical responses and debates' is to argue that these contemporary screen landscapes manifest both literally and metaphorically as loci of desperation. This resonates with Hutchings' ideas about British anti-landscape. In light of

the earlier point about the films' emphasis on the personal over the political, it is significant that Hutchings privileges space over politics. His phrase 'dark heritage' (2004: 28), merely by the addition of an adjective, moves the heritage cinema debate away from what Monk terms its binaristic framework. His description of a landscape'suffused with a sense of profound and sometimes apocalyptic anxiety … of a comprehensive dispossession and vacancy' (ibid: 29)is recognisable from that of Higson, Hill, Monk and Brunsdon, but it is physical and existential rather than overtly political. This dark cinematic heritage, based on what Hutchings calls a 'suppression of the picturesque and touristic' (ibid: 27), underlies the contemporary British film upon which this thesis concentrates.

This is an idea of cultural heritage which finds echoes in the work of various scholars upon whose work the thesis draws. As well as the work of film scholars already mentioned, that of

scholars outside the field of film studies is considered, including Paul Farley and Michael Symons Roberts, Mark Fisher, Richard Mabey, Robert Macfarlane and Raymond Williams. In its choice of these particular authors, the thesis necessarily privileges certain kinds of writing, such as that on landscape and hauntology, over others, such as psychogeography. In relation to the latter, the work of Patrick Keiller and Iain Sinclair is important to a consideration of the treatment of space in British film culture: however as the intersection with storytelling modes is less central to their work, they are not included.

Williams offers an interrogation of the symbiotic relationship between landscape, literature and national culture in *The Country and the City* (1974) , while Fisher examines the overlapping of cultural history and the concept of hauntology, or loops in time, in *Ghosts of My Life* (2014) and *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016). . This thesis builds on their work by linking them with contemporary British films' use of place, time and story in order to show that the screen 'anti-landscapes' of the new century are the cinematic manifestation of a cycle of ideas that permeates literature and popular culture, and is defined by its ambivalence towards landscape. The triangulation in this thesis of film studies, landscape and hauntology also requires that, in order to investigate the recurrent idea of the pestilence in the ditch, it moves backwards and forwards in time to consider the treatment of landscape across a breadth of cultural areas comprising Arthurian mythology, nineteenth-century literature, older films and interdisciplinary approaches to the notion of space. The objective is to draw a clearer line between the artistic traditions upon which contemporary British filmmakers build, and how they renew and subvert those traditions.

The Sense of the Landscape

In defining the landscapes of this British cinema as uncanny, Hutchings acknowledges their sense that 'something awful is already in the countryside, that nature itself has the capacity to

be threatening.' (2004: 34-5) His description of our environment as a 'site for anxiety, uncertainty and alienation' (2015) is central to the depiction of landscape in contemporary British cinema and its echoes of the pestilence in the ditch. The films conjure atmospheres of dislocation, a phrase which succinctly captures the aesthetic approaches to screen space of Arnold, Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley. Their aura of dislocation, of being physically in a place but somehow out of place, is combined with their implications of a force that simultaneously lies in wait – some event buried alive – that has existed before our time, possibly even outside of time itself. The films' use of location results in their sharing a common blurring of space and time that recalls Richard Mabey's exploration, in *The Unofficial Countryside*, of liminal spaces that are neither rural nor urban. In the films, onscreen spaces are liminal and ambivalent, qualities which Mabey articulates as an extension of the ambivalence of our response to British landscape: 'Our attitude towards nature is a strangely contradictory blend of romanticism and gloom.' (2010: 19) This phrase is key to the aesthetic of disharmony in the British films under discussion.

It also connects the countryside with our sense of self and, beyond that, with our sense of national identity. In his work highlighting the tension in British screen treatments of landscape between the rural and the urban, and between an idealised past and a progressive modernity, Paul Newland uses *A Canterbury Tale* as a lens through which to view these questions relating to the countryside and national identity. This is a film suffused by memories of the English past: it opens with an evocation of Chaucer's pilgrims making their way to the cathedral city of Canterbury through the rural landscape six centuries ago, and then continues on through contemporary scenes set upon the same Pilgrims' Way, to suggest that place, in this case the North Downs of England, acts as a conduit to the past. However, Newland argues that embedded in this quasi-mystical approach to the countryside is a conservative mistrust of the future, rooted in a belief that the land must be protected: '… one

of the key themes of the film is the potentially transformative nature of this rural landscape. The film is engaged with the threat of change to the countryside, and, especially, the potentially destructive nature of modernity.' (2016: 2) Newland suggests that for Powell and Pressburger the landscape of *A Canterbury Tale* is something eternal, but also at risk. He goes further by making it a matter of national self: 'the Kent countryside … comes to stand for a vision of what might be at stake if Britain (or in this case specifically, England) cannot be saved.' (2016: 3) He then points to the legacy of the mythic storytelling tradition in forming this sense of a country that needs protecting from change:

> One point that *A Canterbury Tale* appears to be making is that we should not forget how the legends of Albion, Mercia, Elmet, Sir Gawain, John Barleycorn, Robin Hood, Rob Roy, Math (*Mabinogion*) and 'Arcadian plenitude' continue to inform ideas of Britain … These myths have played key roles in the development of an imagined countryside for many years. (2016: 3-4)

This thesis will show how Newland's statement applies to contemporary British cinema in that, despite being predominantly set in modern, post-industrial locations, the films nonetheless draw on and repurpose national myths and legends. In acknowledging the importance of myth, Newland argues that we should be aware of how heroic figures from centuries past have shaped the national self-image, and how such myths have contributed to the creation of an 'imagined countryside'. This idea is important to this thesis because contemporary British films not only question, but reject, the continuation into the new century of this 'imagined countryside'. Their aesthetic project is to separate fact from myth, and to align themselves with what is described by Williams as 'the true history of the English countryside' (2016: 85). However, paradoxically they utilise the tropes of mythic storytelling in order to do so. An example of this is the modern reimagining of the romantic figure of the knight errant in films such as *Dead Man's Shoes, Kill List*, the *Red Riding* trilogy and

Tyrannosaur. These transpose a heroic questing figure, the contemporary descendant of Malory's Sir Gawain, from mediaeval green fields, a space which belongs to the imagined countryside, to the reality of a twenty-first century environment, thus relocating the storytelling mode of epic to contemporary landscapes.

Newland's list of legends that inform 'ideas of Britain' includes a well-known example of a national legend replete with notions of romance, action and nostalgia: that of King Arthur. In its retelling by Sir Thomas Malory as *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), two recurrent notions are foregrounded: the idea of the land as a precious inheritance that needs protecting, and the figure of a guardian who holds the secret to, and passes on the knowledge of, this land. For Malory, this guardian figure is the magician Merlin, and his pupil, the recipient of his lore, is King Arthur. These two ideas, of inheritance and instruction, continue to overlap and inform each other in the relationship between myth and landscape in British culture, and their imprint survives in the contemporary British films under discussion.

Their continuation and indeed persistence can be seen in the example of Rudyard Kipling's novel *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906). A repository of Newland's imagined countryside, Kipling's book is an uncategorisable conglomeration of time-travelling adventure story for children, history lesson on Saxon, Norman and Celt, and mystical rumination on our abiding connection with the landscape. Distributed throughout it are poetic epigraphs to the reader, such as: 'She is not any common Earth/Water or wood or air/But Merlin's Isle of Gramarye/Where you and I will fare.' (1987: 42) These lines align the idea of a national space in Merlin's keeping with Newland's idea of the landscape being an unchanging refuge that needs protecting. From a modern perspective, the phrase 'not any common Earth' is tinged with national exceptionalism: Kipling's love for the landscape is evident, but the implication of his verse is that the land is not only precious, but privileged.

For Rob Young, whose *Electric Eden* considers the late twentieth-century intersection of folk music and cultural history, the ambiguous legacy of *Puck of Pook's Hill* is clear: 'This vertical exploded view of England's pastures is Edwardian psychogeography, designed to instil a sense of the heroic history that has cut its furrows deep in the soil, sowing the seeds of a national psyche.' (2011: 279) Although Young categorises Kipling's vision as nationalistic propaganda, this mystical idea of the landscape, of 'Merlin's Isle of Gramarye', paradoxically has traction in the Britain of the early twenty-first century as depicted in the films of this study. Although the tone may be radically different from earlier iterations, contemporary British cinema presents a new vision of Merlin's Gramarye. The distance between Edwardian national dreams and the reality of the new century is encapsulated by a comparison between the reverence of Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* and the irreverence of Wheatley's *Kill List*. Kipling's verse genders the landscape as female, conforming to how knights might refer to ladies, or mariners to a ship; while the choice of the verb 'fare' deliberately suggests antiquity and even echoes the idea of a wayfarer or pilgrim from Chaucer's time. In stark contrast to this, near the denouement of *Kill List* as its two anti-heroes, Jay (Neil Maskell) and Gal (Michael Smiley), speculate about the wealthy owner of the property in which they're hiding, Gal quips: 'He's probably fucking the scullery maid.' These six words of dialogue juxtapose an idea associated with an earlier historical era, the power relationship between master and serf characterised as *droit de seigneur*, with the modern profanity of Gal's expletive.

The tone of Kipling's Gramarye is solemn, courtly and respectful, while that of Jay and Gal's world, of new Gramarye, is insubordinate, paranoid and darkly humorous. However, both are aspects of the same nation. We recognise the screen spaces of this twenty-first-century Gramarye as liminal interzones, edgelands between the country and the city that signify Mabey's unofficial countryside. They are spaces that reflect and augment the films' sense of

the landscape, and conjure atmospheres of disenchantment and betrayal which correspond with the films' themes. Thus, the imagined countryside of contemporary British films is a disorientating interzone, mired in the pestilence in the ditch. This points to the conclusion that, in the films upon which this thesis focuses, the new century's answer to Merlin and to Kipling is to say that what is represented here is very much a common earth, to which all are entitled. This inheritance is tinged with sadness, however, because the same landscapes, while capable of beauty, are also problematic in that they are dangerous spaces marked by the wrongs done within them in earlier times.

Thus far I have considered he reciprocal relationship between the energy of the landscape itself and the imagination of the writers, artists and filmmakers who have represented it. I have also suggested how a sense of the landscape is linked to the stories and legends of Britain whichthen feed into the films under discussion. I now want to offer some historical context by considering how this sense of the landscape has manifested itself in and migrated across nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and culture, and to show how it has been channelled and redirected in the twenty-first century by filmmakers such as Arnold, Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley.

Returning to Newland's ideas of an imagined countryside, what is being discussed here is abstract, but its implications are concrete. I have already argued that the boundary between the fictional, or story, and the non-fictional, or reality, is porous. The resulting space, the countryside wherein the narratives unfold, is imagined, and in many instances becomes idealised (as in the typical products of the 'heritage industry'). This links to Williams' explanation for what he sees as the distortion of the history of the English countryside: 'An idealisation, based on a temporary situation and on a deep desire for stability, served to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time.' (2016: 63) It is the aesthetic and ideological project of the contemporary British films under discussion to resist, and beyond

that to revolt against, this idealisation. Their mission is not to cover and evade, but to reveal and explore. As discussed above, what they revolt against is the legacy of Merlin's Isle of Gramarye, while simultaneously drawing a map of its remnants. For these films, landscape is a mythologised space within which national legends exist *and* require contemporary reinterpretations.

A central component of this rebellious quality in contemporary British cinema is the significance it attaches to local specificity or regionality. This idea is articulated by Patrick Kavanagh in his celebrated 1951 poem 'Epic', where he makes the case that two bickering Irish farmers are in fact of Homeric stature - by foregrounding a local quarrel in rural Ireland against the background of the larger conflict, on a global scale, of the Munich Agreement of 1938. Kavanagh knows that, compared to ongoing monumental political events, the farmers' disagreement is petty, but in conclusion he experiences the following epiphany: '… Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind/He said: I made the Iliad from such/A local row. Gods make their own importance.' (2000: 102) Kavanagh's suggestion that this 'local row' between farmers can in fact be read as Homeric, and is therefore epic in stature, is echoed by contemporary British films' simultaneous embrace and subversion of the epic storytelling mode.

In Kavanagh's poem, despite the fact that the farmers' dispute concerns a small plot of land in a regionally specific corner of rural Ireland, irrespective and also *because of* its regionality it is nonetheless large in scale, just as to its protagonists it is of supreme significance. This interplay between the local and the universal is important to an understanding of the project of contemporary British cinema , which is not to idealise but instead to acknowledge the contradictions described by what Williams calls 'the actual and bitter contradictions of the time' . The films achieve this in a twofold fashion: by setting their stories in edgeland spaces located between urban and rural, and by emphasising their regional specificity. Like

Kavanagh's farmers' dispute, the screen dramas may concern local rows, but they quintessentially contain larger truths. Furthermore, in this way the films advance the argument that characters and stories that might be perceived as marginal – because, in their regionality, they exist on the margins of an imagined map - move to its centre.

An additional component of this subversive quality in the films under discussion is the way in which their landscapes draw on mythic elements. For example, towards the climax of *Dead Man's Shoes* the protagonist, Richard, materialises out of a green hedgerow. On a deeper level, the quiet shock the viewer experiences at this moment might result from an unconscious recognition of this figure as an echo of the folkloric character of Jack-in-the-Green, or the Green Man. According to Carolyne Larrington: 'The Green Man is originally a decorative motif: typically, an image of a man's face peering out from a cluster of stylised oak-leaves … Occasionally the club-wielding Green Man, the type who can be described as the 'combative Green Man' is to be found emerging out of the vegetation …' (2015: 226) With the image of Richard stepping from concealment within the leaves, Meadows simultaneously draws lightly on mythology and aligns nature with death, as at this point in the narrative Richard is close to the end both of his cycle of violent revenge and of his own life.

Such a mythic figure offers an aesthetic manifestation of the film's triangulation of geology, history and the human imagination; or, as previously discussed, the interrelationship of place, time and story. In her writing on the subject of the Green Man, Larrington interweaves geology and history with analyses of a number of literary responses to Britain's landscape. Of John Gordon's children's novel *The Giant Under the Snow* (1968) wherein the first clue to the presence of the Green Man is a grassy hill in the landscape likened to a gigantic hand with trees growing between its fingers, she says: 'This Green Man is … a true animated land form' (ibid.: 226). The key concepts here are scale and time: this hidden giant dates from long

before our era and, now returned into earth, will remain there long after our own deaths. In the films under discussion, this is reflected in their preoccupation with human transience and death in the context of landscape.

A mythic figure such as Gordon's hidden giant finds expression in the more malign version of the Green Man which manifests as Old Man Willow in J.R.R.Tolkien's novel *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954). Events from the trio of chapters early in the narrative, titled 'The Old Forest', 'In the House of Tom Bombadil' and 'Fog on the Barrow-downs', are suffused with this sense of the landscape being proximate to death. Central to each chapter is an eternal figure of great, indeterminate age: firstly Old Man Willow, an ancient tree who sings the unsuspecting wayfarer to sleep and then ingests him. Secondly Tom Bombadil, a human who has married into the fairy clan and thus understands natural law better than others of his race. Thirdly a Barrow-wight, the malevolent spirit of a dead king into whose clutches the sleeping protagonists fall when they lose their way in the fog and are forced to spend the night on haunted ground.

What connects Tolkien's ideas back to those of Kipling, and forward to the twenty-first century filmmakers under discussion, is firstly a shared sense that the boundary between place and time is porous. By extension the land, represented by both malign or benign figures who are not subject to death, is not bounded by death but exists outside of time. This sense of the porousness of temporal boundaries is central to Wheatley's treatment of place, time and story in *A Field in England*. These folklore-inspired fictions, through the above-mentioned iterations of the Green Man figure, ask fundamental questions about our attitude towards, and place within, the landscape. Secondly, what further connects these mythic figures with the films of this thesis is an ambivalence towards landscape because of its relationship in the human imagination with the notion of death. As earth is traditionally where the body is buried, so the land is connected with death: this is explored in the scene from Arnold's

Wuthering Heights with which this introduction opens, where Cathy lies unreachable within the earth and Heathcliff tries impotently to unearth her.

Returning to the mythic figures as discussed above, literary representations of the landscape as concealing something within or beneath it of gigantic size and of great age, that can be woken up and which may or may not be benign, suggest hope as well as fear. This is embodied by the ambivalent figure of Merlin, in whom hope and fear find equal expression, and by the similarly contradictory figure of the Green Man. The relevance to this thesis of these figures is that Merlin finds later cinematic reincarnations as the squire in *A Canterbury Tale* and as the necromancer in *A Field in England*. In both these films the characters, like Merlin, function as custodians of the land's secrets. It is the project of this thesis to uncover the nature of these secrets, incorporating ideas of mortality and time in relation to landscape, as explored in the films under discussion.

The Grimpen Mire

Having considered the survival and migration of responses to landscape into twenty-first century British films in terms of myth and folklore, I will now turn my attention to nineteenth-century literature, and its suggestion of latent violence in our landscape through a use of topographical and sociological elements. For example, the treatment of location in Emily Bronte's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights* is of such vividness that it suggests the forensic documentation of an entire way of life in a hostile environment. Here there is certainly an equation between landscape and death: 'We came to the chapel … it lies in a hollow between two hills … near a swamp whose peaty moisture is said to answer all the purposes of embalming on the few corpses deposited there.' (1976: 21) The novelist's evocative descriptions are matched by a cartographer's eye for physical detail. The tone is gloomy and matter-of-fact rather than romantic, offering a concept of place that contrasts

with Kipling's mystical sense of Merlin's Isle of Gramarye, and which underlines the fact that all is far from well. This ominous quality in British landscape, which serves Bronte so well in heightening atmosphere to complement her narrative, is captured by Andrea Arnold in her film of the novel.

It is also expressed in a notable literary example from the end of the nineteenth-century, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 1892 Sherlock Holmes story 'The Copper Beeches': 'It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.' (2009: 323) Here Conan Doyleanticipates the writing of Williams, firstly by differentiating the country from the city, and secondly by directing us not to take the countryside at face value but to look behind its attractive façade at the reality which it masks. He also gestures towards the same 'something awful' (2004: 34) in the countryside as Hutchings. The sense of nature having the capacity to threaten is developed further as a motif by Conan Doyle in his depiction of the West Country landscape of Dartmoor in the 1902 Sherlock Holmes novella *The Hound of the Baskervilles:* '… behind the peaceful and sunlit countryside there rose ever, dark against the evening sky, the long, gloomy curve of the moor, broken by the jagged and sinister hills.' (2009: 700) Again, it is suggested that behind the surface image the truth is to be found, a truth that is not reassuring, but menacing. Bronte's image of the swamp, a physical and existential locus of fear and liminality, finds a continuation in the Grimpen Mire of *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* whose villain Stapleton laughs: 'That is the great Grimpen Mire … A false step yonder means death to man or beast … Even in dry seasons it is a danger to cross it, but after these autumn rains it is an awful place … It's a bad place, the great Grimpen Mire.' (2009: 707-8)

Aficionados of the fiction of Conan Doyle might respond superficially with a shiver of pleasure to this promise of the horrific. But on closer inspection, the 'awful place' of the

Mire can be understood by the reader to be genuinely terrifying. It is recognisable as containing the same threat of implied violence as is present in other depictions of nature in British folklore, literature and art which influence the contemporary British films under discussion. The Grimpen Mire is an idea that forms part of our contradictory attitude towards nature, as defined by Mabey. This thesis acknowledges that the sense of the landscape as Grimpen Mire, the idea that there is a pestilence in the ditch, finds continued expression in the treatment of landscape by contemporary British films.

Bronte's and Conan Doyle's choice of the image of a swamp is so arresting because it offers an example of a liminal space that combines two elements: uncertainty, being neither earth nor water, and a fatal quality, being associated with danger and death. In addition, by articulating the idea of nature as treacherous, as a bad place, these nineteenth-century authors anticipate the writings of both Hutchings and Newland. A recurrent theme of the films is that a promise has been broken and a dream has curdled, and the filmmakers' use of liminal spaces contributes to this aesthetic of disillusionment. This prompts the question: if, as discussed, writers and artists in previous centuries posit that we cannot trust the 'smiling and beautiful countryside', was there ever a time when we did, and if so, what was the promise in which we trusted but now no longer believe? This sense of evanescence, in relation to ideas of landscape , runs through the films under discussion and is important to an understanding of them. This is a cinema that offers an alternative British landscape to a prettified, touristic image, one which is home to the marginalised characters and sectors of society s with which the films are preoccupied.

This refusal to idealise the past chimes with the writing of Williams and with certain British films in the new century, and leads us to conclude that there is no cause for celebration, but rather for sober reflection. This in turn aligns with the geographical and moral interzone occupied by the films, and epitomises an ambivalence towards the contemporary which

Fisher sums up as there being ‘no present to grasp and articulate any more.’ (2014: 9) This comment grows out of his conviction that, in an era of late capitalism, society has stagnated and ‘cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity.’ (ibid.: 9) This sense of strange simultaneity, articulated by Fisher and borne of frustration at an apparent lack of development, informs the attitude of these contemporary British films towards cultural time and history. Such an unmoored, ahistorical vision of the present enables the films to be at once disconcerting and liberating, within narratives and atmospheres that are simultaneously alienated and alienating. What unites these filmmakers and cultural historians of the new century is this shared sense that our present is a barren space where nothing grows. This betokens disillusionment with the present, and yet their attitude to the past is by no means sentimental and, as suggested, the roots of this ambivalence are buried in the folklore and literature of the past. The result, in terms of the kind of contemporary British cinema discussed here, is a tension between looking ahead and looking back, articulated by Hutchings asprospects of the future which ‘lead inexorably to fantasies about the past and about annihilation of the national self.’ (2004: 29) Hutchings’ warning is that the consequences of self-delusion when considering our national past are not merely destructive, but self-destructive; and it is this that is manifested in the films.

This introduction has considered the paradoxical relationships that define the films’ use of landscape. The structure of the thesis has been explained as being organised around the four concepts of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic as a means of understanding the shifting ambivalences of the films. A map has been offered of how each of the subsequent chapters of this thesis will relate to these paradoxical relationships as depicted within the films, in order to advance the overarching argument through discussion of each concept. To return to Rawlings’ idea of the pestilence in the ditch, the four concepts of eerie, pastoral, heritage and

epic are used because each is a storytelling mode that radiates outwards from, and connects back to, Rawlings' idea as a link between landscape and certain contemporary British films. This introduction has further considered how, despite an awareness on the part of writers, artists and filmmakers that it is an imagined construct, the magnetic pull persists of a particular version of a national past, of which the notion of Merlin's Isle of Gramarye is an emblem. This dream of a past is based upon a contradiction, which David Southwell describes in his introduction to Paul Watson's *Book of England's Dark Dreaming* (2018) as 'the sleepy peace of place that never truly existed.'

As Chapter Five will address, this ambivalence between dream and reality is typified by the use, at a key moment in Wheatley's *Sightseers,* of Blake's 'Jerusalem' to juxtapose the graphic violence of a modern murder with romantic notions of England's past. At the mid-point of the narrative, a murder is captured by Wheatley in such a way as to suggest that it is at once grotesquely violent and dream-like. This aesthetic effect is achieved by the action being aurally accompanied by a deep voice of a patriarchal-sounding older male reciting William Blake's 1804 poem 'Jerusalem', with its mythic associations of 'ancient time' and 'England's green and pleasant land'. In the context of the film, this bravura alignment between present and past lends cultural resonance, and indeed dissonance, to the moment's brutality. The effect is that we associate the act not merely with the killer but with its wider context, an English heritage landscape that stretches back two centuries to William Blake, and implicitly to further back still. Wheatley's use of a literary reference situates the violent act both geographically in the English landscape, and existentially in time. It further offers the suggestion that the act is simultaneously one of patriotism and desecration.

The scene encapsulates the equivocal stance of Wheatley and of the other contemporary British filmmakers in this study towards ideas of a national past. They emphatically reject romantic fantasies of this past, but also acknowledge and arguably even cherish them. By

locating Blake's ideal of 'England's green and pleasant land' within the modern landscape, Wheatley makes a philosophical point about the distance between the dream and the reality. This need to puncture an illusory attitude towards history and nation is perhaps the most resonant theme of the films under discussion, and the conflict it presents is manifested in the ambivalence of the films' attitude to landscape. As such, they constitute a formidable twenty-first-century riposte to the heritage-oriented notions of Gramarye and Jerusalem which this introduction has considered. The hostile landscape which Heathcliff traverses at the end of *Wuthering Heights*, and the physicality of his engagement with the earth in which Cathy is buried, are overwhelming, but no less beautiful for that.

Eerie-Pastoral-Heritage-Epic

CHAPTER ONE

THE EERIE IN LANDSCAPE



Catch Me Daddy (Daniel Wolfe, 2014)

Defining the Eerie

It was established in the Introduction that this thesis will use the key concepts of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic as its methodology to understand the approaches to landscape of the contemporary British films under discussion. These approaches are articulated by phrases such as Hutchings' 'British anti-landscape' and 'dark heritage', and Brunsdon's 'twenty-first century audio-visual landscape of desperation'. They imply the existence of an alternative, Dionysian national cinematic tradition running counter to a more mainstream, Apollonian counterpart. The nouns 'landscape' and 'heritage' point to notions of the visible and the cherished, but Hutchings' addition of a prefix and an adjective twists the ideas. It is this twist in notions relating to landscape that, as argued in the Introduction, is captured in the idea of the pestilence in the ditch, and which will be developed in this thesis in order to make us look afresh at the use of both screen space and cultural tradition in contemporary British cinema. The next three chapters will examine two modes that are paradoxically conjoined, the eerie and the pastoral. The foundations of this Dionysian tradition, or shadow strain, of British

cinema are located within these two modes. In order to understand both, these chapters will assess how, in the service of their aesthetic aims, the films reclaim and reinvent landscape.

In relation to this, it is worth reflecting on how the interrelationship of the eerie and the pastoral grows out of a paradox, and how this in turn inflects the identity of the films. According to the novelist Alan Garner, in his discussion of the centrality to art of paradox:

> We have to find parables, we have to tell stories to unriddle the world. It is yet another paradox. Language, no matter how finely worked, will not speak the truth. What we feel most deeply we cannot say in words. At such levels only images connect; and hence story becomes symbol. (1997: 55)

The films under consideration in this thesis conform to this storyteller's manifesto, not merely because they work in a visual medium and thus image is paramount to their effectiveness – 'only images connect' - but because their approach to storytelling can be described as being led by parable or image. A salient characteristic of all the films is the prominence they give to symbol: for example, a man upright holding on to a leash, at the end of which another man on all fours sniffs like a dog (*A Field in England*), or a teenage boy and girl running their fingers through the hair of a horse's mane (*Wuthering Heights*). What is the meaning of such symbols? According to W.H. Auden: 'A symbol is felt to be such before any possible meaning is consciously recognised; ie. an object or event which is felt to be more important than the reason can immediately explain is symbolic.' (1985: 60)

This peculiar quality, of something feeling more important than the reason can immediately explain, is also a working definition of the numinous. In its discussion of the eerie, this chapter will demonstrate how the filmmakers' command of diverse storytelling elements such as the numinous, the symbolic, the image and the parable gives the films their force. This in turn draws on another paradox: with their exceptional sensitivity to place and to

landscape, filmmakers like Arnold, Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley can arguably be considered as nature poets of the screen, the heirs to a literary tradition of Blake, Clare, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Yet, at the same time, despite the use of ingredients such as the rural idyll, which in other artists' hands might be treated more poetically, the films appear to actively reject any treatment of their chosen subject matter that might be classified as poetic. This ambivalent aesthetic stance, simultaneously poetic and anti-poetic, endows the films' landscapes with eerie qualities.

In relation to this, a comparison of *Dead Man's Shoes* and *Dark River* reveals how, despite superficial differences, they resemble each other tonally and thematically because of their use of landscape. Meadows' film is set in the East Midlands and concerns the return of a paratrooper (Paddy Considine) to enact vengeance upon his hometown's villains. Barnard's film is set in West Yorkshire and concerns the return of a prodigal daughter (Ruth Wilson) to the farm which her brother (Mark Stanley) inherited from their abusive father (Sean Bean). Thematically, both films explore the weight of the past upon the present; tonally, they emanate an atmosphere of intertwined melancholy and unease, the quintessence of the pestilence in the ditch. What unites tone and theme is how the landscapes of the films, at once pastoral and post-industrial, poetic and anti-poetic, reflect story and atmosphere to become spaces within which the protagonists must define themselves by means of violent action. In both films, dramatic tension is created by the skilful manipulation of the opposed elements of lyricism and dynamism. The situation of this tension between harmony and violence within the landscape dominates the contemporary British films under discussion.

Wuthering Heights affords a further illustration of this in the unresolved tension between the beauty of its rustic imagery and the brutal realism with which it depicts life on a working farm in the nineteenth century. Arnold is an artist who in her fusion of themes of social justice with visionary imagery could be considered a cinematic heir to English Romantic

poets such as Blake and Clare. Yet her anti-poetic stance is channelled by the film's series of shifting oppositions of violent and lyrical, squalid and picturesque, eerie and pastoral that define its aesthetic texture. The analogy with the poets of two centuries earlier rests on the works finding a shared poetry in deprivation. For example, the downtrodden protagonists of *Fish Tank*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Tyrannosaur* follow the socialist and philanthropic template laid down by a poem such as 'Poor Susan' in Wordsworth and Coleridge's 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. This paradox, of an anti-poeticism existing at the heart of the filmmakers' poetic vision, is expressed by the films' ambivalence towards place, and results in them identifying as eerie.

Before an analysis of the films' use of the eerie, it will be instructive first to define what connotes an eerie landscape. For this, I will draw principally on Mark Fisher's 2016 essay *The Weird and the Eerie*. It contains a series of definitions, in particular of the eerie, which through a series of examples from the films under discussion I will articulate and expand upon. Fisher's essay is structured in two halves, the first a discussion of the weird, and the second the eerie. In the first section, 'The Weird Against the Worldly', Fisher establishes that: 'weird fiction always presents us with a threshold between worlds … the notion of *the between* is crucial to the weird.' (2016: 28) This is a continuation of his assessment in *Ghosts of My Life* that in certain fictions we find we have crossed over into another kind of space. By this definition, the space outside a house, being a threshold between interior and exterior and thus between worlds, is demonstrably weird, and by extension uncanny and eerie. I am applying Fisher's notion of the between to contemporary British films, and find a different manifestation in each so that they all qualify as, in a sense, weird fictions. Two examples of such thresholds between worlds are, firstly, the abandoned farm in *Dead Man's Shoes* where returned soldier Richard hides out in between his raids upon the local town to take revenge upon his brother's tormentors. Secondly, the eponymous space of *A Field in England* is a

clear representation of the between as defined by Fisher: it is hard to think of a more literal manifestation of the weird than Wheatley's choice of setting, which is neither the battlefield of the English Civil War, nor the mysterious alehouse which the soldiers claim as their goal, but a threshold between the two. So, the narrative of Wheatley's film observes an Aristotelian dramatic unity of time, action and place to present us with the transformation of an English field, a space familiar from Williams' writing as a locus of the idyllic and the pastoral, into an arena of the weird, inside which individual insecurities are magnified because the characters are in effect imprisoned in the between.

In his definition of the weird Fisher next considers the role of the grotesque: 'This capacity to excite laughter means that the grotesque is perhaps best understood as a particular form of the weird.' (2016: 33) This contention, when taken in conjunction with Fisher's description of the fault-line between the grotesque and the weird as 'frequent conjunctions of the laughable with that which is not laughable' (2016: 38), finds particular resonance in the films of Wheatley. These are characterised by the juxtaposition of exaggerated character traits with moments of graphic violence to produce a comedic tone that is at once slapstick and ghoulish. Thus the petty neuroses of the Brighton family of *Down Terrace* (2009), and the sexist misanthropy of Chris, the rambler-murderer of *Sightseers*, are portrayed as laughable, but the brutal depictions of their or their victims' deaths are not. This marks out the films' territory as occupying a space between: weird because it lies on a threshold between worlds, and grotesque because it excites an uneasy laughter within this realm. Fisher's next point on the grotesque is reflected in the work not only of Wheatley but also of Arnold, specifically in the way she presents the character of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* as more attuned to the farm's animals than its human owners: 'We could go so far as to say that it is the human condition to be grotesque, since the human animal is the one that does not fit in.' (2016: 35) This connection between human, animal and misfit, asserting the essential grotesqueness of

the human condition, finds its most eloquent expression in Arnold's films, particularly in her triangulation in *Wuthering Heights* between its young protagonists, nature and society. It is this identification of the protagonists of the films of, among others, Arnold, Considine and Wheatley as not fitting in that aligns them with both the weird and the grotesque. This then returns us to that paradox upon which the films' tone is founded, which Fisher articulates as 'the conflict between the claustrophobic mundaneness of England and the grotesque-weird'. (2016: 36) I apply this phrase specifically to the tension within the contemporary British films under discussion: it exactly describes the main theme of *Kill List* in that its protagonist, Jay (Neil Maskell), goes on a journey from the claustrophobic mundaneness of English suburbia to a conclusion at the heart of the grotesque-weird, a sacrificial rite where no one's face is visible and Jay is the victim.

Moving to a discussion of the eerie, in Fisher's chapter 'Approaching the Eerie' he offers the following definition: '… there is no doubt that the sensation of the eerie clings to certain kinds of physical spaces and landscapes … (it) occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something.' (2016: 61) Thus, the eerie is defined either by failure of absence or a failure of presence, and apply it to the British films under examination in this thesis to demonstrate that in their use of landscape they utilise the second mode, where there is nothing when there should be something. This is defined by Fisher as: 'the feeling of the eerie that pertains to ruins or to other abandoned structures.' (2016: 62) As previously established, ruins and abandoned structures are a recurrent motif of the films under discussion. It links to Fisher's notions of lost futures, where cultural time has folded back on itself and we seem to be living in a state of strange simultaneity. Applied to landscape, these notions manifest as eerie, and in the films they take the form of a ruin, such as the gothic silhouette on the horizon at the start of *Dead Man's Shoes*, later revealed to be the castle where Richard's brother Anthony was hanged, or

of an abandoned structure, such as the industrial outhouses used by the protagonists of both *Dead Man's Shoes* and *Tyrannosaur*.

Clair Schwarz writes about the role of metaphor and symbol in *Dead Man's Shoes*:

> Looming over the small town which makes up the primary diegesis of *Dead Man's Shoes*, Riber Castle is a visual metaphor for a range of male follies: the actual folly of Riber Castle, the folly of its architect, and metaphorically the follies of the characters in the film. The looming presence of the castle accents the gothic ambience of the film, portentously heralding a future tragedy. Indeed, *Dead Man's Shoes* itself – with its amalgam of generic conventions – can be read as a monstrous hybrid of cannibalised material gathered from textual 'corpses'. (2013: 96)

By linking the 'looming presence' and 'gothic ambience' of the castle ruins with the film's theme of disenfranchised masculinity and generic hybridity, Schwarz articulates the peculiar aesthetic force of Meadows' film. In this way, rather than representing Forrest's new realism as discussed in the Introduction, the aesthetic identity of *Dead Man's Shoes* is closer to Schwarz's 'monstrous hybrid of cannibalised material'. This amalgam nature is central to the aesthetic of the contemporary British films under discussion, because it hybridises the components of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic. Similarly to Richard in *Dead Man's Shoes*, the protagonists of *Kill List* and *Tyrannosaur* are in constant motion, and this is a further manifestation of eerie. Whether driving, running or walking through communal spaces that appear emptier than they ought to be, this movement through eerie spaces summons paranoid notions of conspiracy and decay. These are themes that preoccupy the filmmakers. Moreover, Fisher's idea that there is 'nothing present when there should be something' qualifies the films' use of landscape as eerie, occupying as they do a kind of moral and physical interzone.

The above-mentioned films use the urban, suburban or edgelands as settings, but equally in their use of the rural these films offer little escape from an eerie failure of presence. The two that use explicitly pre-industrial settings, *A Field in England* and *Wuthering Heights*, deepen their sense of emptiness not only by showing rustic landscapes devoid of all but a few human figures (and, in the case of *A Field in England*, devoid of any human habitation), but by their introduction to these spaces of the motif of hauntings. Fisher's definition of haunting as 'a failed mourning' (2014: 22) and his related phrase 'the refusal of the ghost to give up on us' (2014: 22) find cinematic expression at the end of *A Field in England* in the apparent return of Friend and Jacob, characters who we had believed dead, and in the second half of *Wuthering Heights* in the increasingly jagged counterpoint of the older and younger selves of Heathcliff and Cathy, implying that they remain frozen at the same point of adolescence. The result is that both films suggest that their characters are haunting themselves, and beyond this that each film is its own ghost. This ghostly effect of two time-frames existing in a strange simultaneity leads us to how time itself becomes eerie in these films. In relation to the relationship between time and notions of eerie, Fisher reflects on how British filmmaker Nic Roeg works with 'parallels, pre-figurations and echoes, inviting us to see time as a rhyming structure.' (2016: 68-9) Roeg's treatment of fragmented time in films such *Performance* (1970), *Walkabout* (1971) and *Don't Look Now* (1973) finds an echo in the new century in the work of Ben Wheatley. Both filmmakers' use of time as a rhyming structure is a technical aspect of the filmmaking craft of editing. This translates, when allied to characters who are revenants and to spaces that are thresholds between worlds, into a sensation of the eerie.

Sightseers and *A Field in England* constitute two Wheatley films in particular that experiment with a system of parallels, pre-figurations and echoes, as outlined by Fisher, to achieve an eerie effect in terms of their use of onscreen time. Both films use the device, as does Roeg, of contrapuntal editing across time-frames as a means of conjuring an atmosphere that can be

defined as eerie, by disorientating and thereby creating a sense of unease in the viewer. In the former this happens by intercutting Chris' murder of a fellow caravanner on a hilltop at dawn with the sexual dreams of his partner Tina and the bloody shamanic sacrifice of a chicken. In the latter it happens when, as anticipated by its protagonist Whitehead (Reece Shearsmith), the survivors in the field are in his words 'blasted by an ill planet' and the ensuing montage of faces, figures, sky and earth becomes rapid to the point of delirium. What makes these sequences eerie, rather than merely examples of technically proficient *mise-en-scène,* is their subversion of the relationship between character and space. The tone of *Sightseers* is founded on the paradoxical relationship between the homely and the transgressive (ie. rambling and serial killing), thus making it the apotheosis of Fisher's 'conflict between the claustrophobic mundaneness of England and the grotesque-weird'. Chris and Tina leave home and cross over into the physically unfamiliar space of the open road as well as into a psychologically unfamiliar space, wherein their identities are deconstructed and reborn through the discovery of their vocation as killers. In *A Field in England,* Whitehead must physically pass through the liminal space located between battlefield and alehouse while simultaneously undergoing the psychological and spiritual humiliation of being enslaved by the necromancer O'Neil, before he can triumph over his antagonist and achieve transcendence over himself and time. In both films, the characters enact a crossing-over of space that is physical, psychological and temporal. It is this latter quality in particular, of temporality, that renders them eerie: the cost of their journey is that they must exist out of time.

Writing about disorientation in Wheatley's films, Adam Lowenstein makes the same point about *A Field in England* that Clair Schwarz does about *Dead Man's Shoes*. He underlines the interconnectedness of space and genre: 'the field itself ultimately swallows all space. It provides a sort of floating nowhere that allows the film to roam between its genre markers with unsettlingly fluid ease, as if the familiarity of genre was always being erased and

redrawn by the strangeness of the setting.' (2016: 10) Acknowledging the importance in Wheatley's filmography of writer and editor Amy Jump, for Kevin M Flanagan:

> Wheatley and Jump's ideas dwell extensively on contradictions or hidden potentialities of landscape: locations as haunted by the burdensome weight of the past (*Sightseers*, *Field*); or landscapes as offered up as a proving ground between the natural world and uncanny, unseen forces (*Field*); or the landscape as a place defined by alternating elements of claustrophobic closure and radical openness (*Kill List*, *Sightseers,* and *Field*). (2016: 19)

Flanagan's emphasis on the hidden, haunted, uncanny and unseen nature of these screen landscapes returns us to the idea of the pestilence in the ditch. Beyond this, the films' use of time as a rhyming structure connects them to the mode of the ghost story, because it is a technique shared by both.

Of Jonathan Miller's 1968 film of M.R.James' ghost story 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad', Fisher says: 'The eeriness of Miller's film comes from the way it treats the landscape as an agent in its own right.' (2016: 80) This idea of landscape having agency, which finds onscreen expression in the films' treatment of space, bears closer examination. The above-mentioned James ghost story is set on the bleak windswept coast of East Anglia, and both it and Miller's film create a portentous sense of place using ingredients such as weather, sky and the long-distance perspective of a deserted winter beach. However, it is only with the introduction of plot, which in this narrative concerns a lone academic, Parkins, whose excavation of an old whistle from a Saxon burial-site results in the summoning of its supernatural guardian, that the landscape has agency conferred upon it. Without this trigger of plot, which in the James story takes the form of the finding of the whistle, the landscape remains unactivated. It is an important distinction to make when defining the eerie in landscape: a sense of place, the where, is of consequence, but the out of place, the what,

matters more. Once a figure, distant and possibly malevolent, appears following Parkins along the desolate beach in James' story, the landscape becomes eerie because, returning to Fisher's definition: 'there is something present where there should be nothing' (2016: 61). This in turn prompts consideration of whether a landscape, or space, might be benevolent or malevolent. Fisher considers 'the malign version of the eerie' (2016: 81) in the work of two writers, M.R.James and Alan Garner, and its screen variant can be briefly explored by contrasting the use, in two recent screen fictions that closely concern themselves with the British landscape, of the motif of digging.

Firstly, in the BBC television series *Detectorists* (Mackenzie Crook, 2014-17) two middle-aged friends, Andy (Mackenzie Crook) and Lance (Toby Jones), comb rural Essex with their metal detectors, usually finding only ring-pulls but occasionally turning up something of historical value. The series is a bittersweet comedy of manners set within a landscape that is essentially benign. Precisely how benign can be judged by the consequences when Andy unearths and blows an ancient hawking whistle: in what can be read as a riposte to 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad', the found object summons not a malign entity but a panoramic, humanist vision of local history across the centuries. The co-existence of present and past within the same landscape lends it Fisher's strange simultaneity, but the tone is joyous rather than eerie, benign rather than malign. Secondly, in *A Field in England*, what has been established as an eerie landscape becomes malign when activated by the digging up by the soldiers of a wooden stake that frees the necromancer O'Neil from his invisible prison. Then the malign agency of the space increases as, under O'Neil's spell, the men are obliged to obey his commands to dig for buried treasure, but what they find at the bottom of the hole is not gold but a human skull. The act of digging in *Detectorists* is a harmonious, Apollonian act, whereas in *A Field in England* it is chaotic and Dionysian. In both cases it is important to make the distinction that the landscape has presence, but not agency, and that what

determines whether the landscape is benign or malign is the characters' actions within the space.

Fisher articulates this in his evaluation of the importance of landscape in the work of writer Alan Garner: 'Garner points to the eerie power of landscape, reminding us of the ways in which physical spaces condition perception, and of the ways in which particular terrains are stained by traumatic events.' (2016: 96-7) Applying this to the British screen fictions under discussion, in *Detectorists* space conditions perception to inspire in Andy and Lance feelings of reverence, even love, for their field in Essex which here is a terrain stained more practically than psychically by the debris of history. In *A Field in England*, on the other hand, the soldiers' perception is conditioned by their arrival in the eerily deserted field even before they free O'Neil or eat magic mushrooms, actions which only distort their and our perceptions further before the separate but interlinked catalysts of magic and hallucinogens render the terrain traumatic. When defining eerie landscapes on film, this thesis develops Fisher's comment on the use of landscape in Garner's work by applying it to the contemporary British films under discussion. There is an eerie power to all their landscapes, built upon the central relationship between physical spaces and perception, and terrains and traumatic events.

The Land of the Dead

What has now been established is the recurrence of two principles, or motifs, in the inflection of landscape as eerie: that perception is conditioned by physical spaces, and that terrain is stained by traumatic events. Describing David Peace's *Red Riding* quartet of novels and their subsequent film adaptations, which will be addressed in depth in Chapter Six, Fisher calls them 'brutal and unrelenting fictions that possess an apocalyptic lyricism'. (2014: 80) This phrase, specifically the words 'apocalyptic lyricism', suggests a trauma linking past,

present and future, and might accurately be applied to the contemporary British films under discussion. Behind Fisher's phrase lies the same paradox as established at the start of this chapter, bringing together the seemingly incompatible to present a new but related opposition, in this instance the idyll (lyricism) and the end of the world (apocalypse). Of the brutal, spectral action in the *Red Riding* quartet which unfolds against the bleak Yorkshire landscape, Fisher points out: '… at a certain point, it becomes unclear as to whether we have crossed over into the land of the dead.' (2014: 81) When applied to landscapes in contemporary British film culture, this is significant because it provides insights into its use of space to conjure an atmosphere of disharmony. 'Land of the dead' suggests a space, either literally post-apocalyptic, or perhaps the vacuum left in the wake of a disaster, possibly even one which originated in a pestilence. Next, the notion of crossing over suggests that we have travelled from somewhere else, presumably the land of the living, certainly a happier state now behind us, which recalls Williams' ideas of rural idyll and the myth of a happier past, as discussed in the Introduction. Finally, 'it becomes unclear', whose use of the present tense gives a sense of limbo, introduces a lack of clarity both literal and moral that implies we no longer know whether we are alive or dead and now exist in a liminal space, a land of the dead where nothing is clear.

Fisher's notion of a land of the dead is important to this thesis because it closely approximates the worlds of the films under discussion, and because the language he finds equivalent to the 'apocalyptic lyricism' of being alive in the new century is the same language that the films use. In relation to this, Daniel Wolfe's expressionistic thriller *Catch Me Daddy* (2014) takes its visceral power from the juxtaposition of the lyrical and the violent, a contrast between the stark beauty of the landscape of the moors of North Yorkshire across which its narrative plays out, and the slow realisation that we are in a land of the dead, where everyone's likely fate is to be killed. Metaphorically, *Catch Me Daddy* equates space

with death, and it achieves this through rendering its landscape eerie, because the land of the dead is where the eerie resides.

Of the contemporary British films under discussion, it is *Catch Me Daddy* that perhaps represents the apotheosis of an eerie landscape on screen. Set on the North Yorkshire moors, it follows a young couple, Laila (Sameena Jabeen Ahmed) and Aaron (Conor McCarron), who are forced to go on the run when six men are despatched at her father's behest to bring her back home. For its first forty-five minutes the film seethes with implicit violence, intercutting the status quo of the couple's domestic life with the oncoming danger of the men gathering and searching for her in a mood of righteous seriousness. Once Laila's brother Zaheer (Ali Ahmad) confronts and is killed by her, however, the pace escalates as the narrative follows the plot of a generic thriller with unexpected twists, rising body count and a climactic encounter between Laila and the father who has paid men to hunt her down. The world of *Catch Me Daddy* is the familiar edgelands between country and city: Laila works at a hair salon but walks home to a static caravan situated in the midst of winter fields. The mercenaries' cars park outside fast-food joints and nightclubs as an interlude before the resumption of the pursuit of the fugitives across the barren moorland. The juxtaposition of urban and rural has rarely felt more casually authentic than it does here, but what makes the space eerie is the nature of the action that plays out within this liminal zone. As the uncompromising nature of the men's intentions becomes clear, so every space on screen becomes vulnerable to their violence. The physical landscape is one of such complete alienation that space itself becomes hostile. All the film's locations - Laila and Aaron's caravan, the moorland, the road, the nightclub, the cars - are subject to the invasion and violation of the male pursuers. There is no safe place, to the extent that usually familiar interiors such as a car or a kitchen are transformed into killing spaces. There is a resolute sense of absence in *Catch Me Daddy*, in that rural and urban location alike are inhospitable

and empty so that, when a presence does obtrude into this space, the fact that it manifests as purely violent elevates the eeriness into Fisher's 'malign version of the eerie'. (2016: 81)

A further way in which *Catch Me Daddy* accentuates the eerie in landscape is technical, in its use of the letterbox frame whose widescreen ratio is used to give the narrative a precise sense of geography. The frame captures the architecture of the edgelands in full as trailers, clubs, bars and buildings are often shown in their entirety, which has the effect of adding to the feeling of there being something absent from these spaces. When combined with the paucity of human appearances within these same frames, the depiction of these locations, either as monolithic presences within the wider landscape or silhouetted against the sky, renders space more eerie in that structures are present, but humans are not. When the six killers meet at a small motorway service station, the image is held for a long time in an extreme wide shot so that the figures and their cars are not only dwarfed by the moorland landscape that surrounds the service station but also framed within an intersection of the motorway with long-distance lorries roaring past in foreground and background. At such a distance, a feeling is enabled of indifference to the action perceived . This effect of such alienation from the unfolding drama is increased by the repeated technique of cutting from an extreme wide shot of a setting to an extreme close up of a character within the same setting. The result is a kind of psychological whiplash in that every sudden cut, from absence to presence, has a destabilising effect. In this way, *Catch Me Daddy* insinuates through its aesthetic that, in this empty landscape, human life is cheap, qualifying it as a land of the dead.

This psychological whiplash, enacted through cutting from shots implying absence to ones implying presence, is exemplified by a consideration of how the pre-credit sequence of *Catch Me Daddy* creates an eerie atmosphere. The sequence lasts just over seven minutes, and roughly divides into three sections. In the first, lasting a minute and a half, we see a montage of a series of extreme wide shots of landscapes: the silhouette of a hill, views of bleak

moorland, city streets, a car park, a mosque. The disconnect between these rural and urban exremes is made more pronounced by the use of a voiceover of a young Asian man, foreshadowing the fathers and brothers of the narrative, reciting Ted Hughes' poem 'Heptonstall Old Church': 'A great bird landed here/Its songs drew men out of rock/Living men out of bog and heather …' Even if one does not know Hughes' connection to Yorkshire and his preoccupation with place and landscape, the effect of the language is to conjure nature, location and history to make us unsure where we are in time. Placed over the montage of imagery of empty spaces, it adds a layer of strangeness so that the viewer is sensorily and emotionally disorientated. The second section of the sequence also lasts a minute and a half, and shows one of the killers who we will meet later in the narrative, Tony (Gary Lewis), inside a static caravan, snorting cocaine and lighting a cigarette before exiting the caravan which stands alone in a bleak moorland wilderness. As he stands by a lake in the middle of nowhere, emptying a plastic carton of his urine into the water, the sense is of a person within landscape, yet utterly alienated by it. In the third section of the sequence, lasting four minutes, we meet the lovers Laila and Aaron, a contemporary Cathy and Heathcliff, sitting within the moorland landscape, sharing a joint, before they return to a caravan decorated by illuminated electric butterflies, and lie there listening to the drumming of rain on the roof. The pre-credit sequence ends with Laila departing the caravan and crossing a series of sweeping edgeland spaces on her way to work at an urban hairdresser's. Above these images, Tim Buckley's 1967 song 'Phantasmagoria in Two' plays, its melancholic folk style contributing to the prologue's overall sense of impending catastrophe.

These opening seven minutes of *Catch Me Daddy* exemplify the land of the dead, and expertly integrate tonal shifts between lyricism and dread to present the eerie in landscape. Our reactions to the unsettling portrayal of landscape in a film such as *Catch Me Daddy* draw on its use of a trope, the liminality of a space between city and country, Fisher's 'land of the

dead', which we are able to define as eerie. In relation to this, certain British films of the new century can be read as an authentic reaction to Williams' 'recurrent myth of a happier and more natural past' (2016: 56), in that they are set within the real locations of a post-industrial landscape stained by the traumatic events of its past. Yet this presentation of British landscape as eerie or haunted, as a land of the dead, has iterations before the twenty-first century. This is illustrated by a consideration of two literary precedents, Beatrix Potter and M.R. James, whose work anticipates Fisher's 'apocalyptic lyricism' and uses liminal spaces in a way that is strikingly similar to the films to come.

The Skull Beneath the Skin of the English Countryside

Beatrix Potter is used here as an example because she is an author more readily associated with children's literature, in other words with the familiar and the homely, than with the uncanny and eerie. Yet, her depiction of a rural landscape in *The Tale of Mr. Tod* (1912) presents an example of the affinity a well-known work of children's literature can have with eerie: 'The sun had set; an owl began to hoot in the wood. There were many unpleasant things lying about, that had much better have been buried; rabbit bones and skulls, and chickens' legs and other horrors. It was a shocking place, and very dark.' (1912: 34) This passage, which would have been regarded at the time as no more than an instance of the well-crafted creation of an atmosphere, sets the scene effectively because it blends aural (owl hooting) and visual (sunset, bones, skulls) imagery to establish a tone of fear. Its clinical attention to details, such as the time of day and the explicit association of nature with death, shows control and economy and furthermore gives the scene a cinematic quality, to the extent that it would not be out of place as an example of screenwriting. However, it is what is omitted, or suggested, that gives it an aura not just of fear but of eerieness. 'There were many unpleasant things lying about, that had much better have been buried' summons dread by refusing to specify and instead leaving much to the imagination. Although Potter does make

explicit what some of the ‘many unpleasant things’ are, namely rabbit bones, skulls and chickens’ legs, what impresses more is vagueness of the next phrase - ‘and other horrors’ - which returns us to the realm of the implicit and the unclear. The scene functions as a vignette of the land of the dead, which is appropriate because what is being described is the house of a predator, Mr. Tod the fox. We register that it is a place of death, but what ensures the passage’s impact is its deliberate imprecision, for example the words ‘many’, ‘much’ and ‘very’ which only serve to increase our anxiety. What identifies the place as eerie, rather than merely macabre, is that it is located on a threshold, a liminal space between day and night, exterior and interior, wood and dwelling, life and death. Furthermore, added to this sense of our crossing over from one state to another is the fact that Mr. Tod is not here. This feeling, of there being an absence where there should be a presence, relates it to use of landscape by the contemporary British films of this study.

As well as being an eerie space, Mr. Tod’s doorstep also draws on the uncanny, a concept characterised by Freud in his essay of 1919 as the familiar rendered unfamiliar. The threshold of a house should, certainly to the child reader, represent the familiar, offering warmth and welcome, but like that other well-known domicile in a wood at night, the witch’s cottage in the fairytale ‘Hansel and Gretel’, Mr. Tod’s dwelling is unfamiliar and threatening, and therefore uncanny. Potter also employs the language of the uncanny, which reflects the liminality of the space. The decisive, no-nonsense tone of ‘had much better have been buried’ and ‘It was a shocking place’ contrasts with the euphemistic ‘other horrors’ and ‘very dark’ whose brevity signals that mere language is not adequate to describing this place. Mr. Tod’s house is uncanny because it exists on a blurred boundary; the addition of our not knowing whether or not we have crossed over, that in fact it is still unclear, makes it eerie.

In his article exploring the ‘eerie allure of the English landscape’ (2015), Robert Macfarlane considers the links between the rural and the eerie. In identifying certain English spaces as

eerie, Macfarlane, like Fisher, acknowledges the influence of the ghost stories of M.R. James, describing their landscape as 'a realm that snags, bites and troubles'. This is recognisable as the same realm as that occupied by Mr. Tod's house, and as that in which certain British films of the twenty-first century play out. Macfarlane begins his discussion with an analysis of James' 1925 story 'A View from a Hill', whose plot concerns a pair of binoculars that have been tampered with by an antiquarian, Baxter, to enable their current owner, Fanshawe, when he looks through them to see the landscape not of the present but of the past, complete with grisly details such as a corpse hanging from a gallows. According to Macfarlane: 'Baxter's macabre optics revealed the skull beneath the skin of the English countryside' (2015). This idea recalls Hutchings' dark heritage and relates to the overarching notion of this thesis that contemporary British films are preoccupied with there being a pestilence in the ditch. Indeed, a section of Hutchings' article on uncanny landscapes, entitled 'Beneath the heritage landscape', reflects on the atemporal realm into which James' occult field-glasses empower the viewer to look. Furthermore, the link between Baxter's binoculars and the camera of contemporary British filmmakers affords an interesting parallel pointing to a kinship between the ghost story as a mode and the films under discussion. Beyond the optical, in that both are asking the viewer to see through a lens, is the magical, that the lens is controlled by an artist, be it a necromancer or a filmmaker, who distorts our vision, specifically in this case in terms of landscape. Whether it's Fanshawe unknowingly looking 'through a dead man's eyes' in 'A View from a Hill', or the viewer experiencing the troubling vision of the past offered in a contemporary British film such as *A Field in England,* in both cases we are made to see 'the skull beneath the skin of the English countryside' wherein landscape is made eerie.

Building on this parallel, Macfarlane points to a connection between the themes of M.R. James and those preoccupying contemporary artists, including filmmakers, who make up

what he terms ‘this eerie counterculture – this occulture’: ‘James’s influence, or his example, has rarely been more strongly with us than now. For there is presently apparent, across what might broadly be termed landscape culture, a fascination with these Jamesian ideas of unsettlement and displacement.’ (2015) Among contemporary British filmmakers it is Wheatley who most frequently returns to these ideas. His first five feature films engage vividly with unsettlement and displacement: what the disintegrating family of *Down Terrace* (2009), the disinherited soldiers of *Kill List*, the homicidal caravanners of *Sightseers*, the bickering Civil War refugees of *A Field in England* and the decadent community of *High-Rise* (2015) have in common is that all are displaced, and none of them appear to call anywhere home. With the exception of *A Field in England*, whose eponymous setting is located far from the domestic, all the films can be said to embody the Freudian uncanny in that the familiar is rendered unfamiliar. *Kill List* follows this arc into the unfamiliar in a tragic vein, as Jay experiences not only increasing alienation from those emblems of the home, his wife and child, but also the climactic enactment of his worst, most paranoid fears. This is when he re-encounters wife and child in an unfamiliar space, the woods at night where, surrounded by masked figures in a firelit ritual, he himself appears to be the anointed sacrificial victim. The implication is that we have crossed over into the land of the dead.

Adam Lowenstein applies Macfarlane’s ideas of unsettlement and displacement directly to *Kill List*: ‘By the film's end, we have lost our spatial bearings as thoroughly as we have lost our genre bearings. We are quite literally in the dark, with nothing left to do but collect ourselves amidst the genre/space disorientation.’ (2016: 7) In *Kill List*, Jay (Neil Maskell) and Gal (Michael Smiley) are former army buddies now working freelance as ‘salesmen’ in a suburban British nowheresville of motorways and hotels, but this job description is a euphemism for contract killing. Jay’s equivocal tone, when talking of his days in ‘Baghdadistan’ and Kiev where, it’s implied, a job went wrong with traumatic consequences,

leaves us in no doubt that he is nostalgic for the simplicity of a soldier's life. As *Kill List* morphs stylistically from social realist domestic drama to hit-man thriller to occult horror, a constant is the psychological realism with which these disenfranchised men are depicted. There are deliberate acknowledgements of a bygone age of chivalry, whether it's Jay and his son Sam fighting with toy swords or the image of a crusader knight in both Sam's and Gal's rooms. Jay begins a bedtime story with the words 'There were these two brave and honourable soldiers,' Gal predicts their new job will mean the 'old team back together again, two musketeers' and later reminds Jay 'it's not a crusade', and evangelists in a hotel dining room sing 'Onward Christian Soldiers'.

Yet, in the world of *Kill List* both Christianity and soldiers are impotent. By casting his action heroes adrift in the existential nowhere of a post-recession edgelands, Wheatley uses space to render the film explicitly political. Jay's statement that it's 'difficult for a man to know where he stands these days' sets up a key theme, that of male disenfranchisement in modern society, and the introduction of occult elements reinforces this threat of male castration. Fiona, the dinner date who Gal describes as a 'glary-eyed phantom' and a 'bit of a demon in bed', is in fact literally a witch who also fires people from their jobs: what worse nightmare could there be for the traditional working man? Jay's unmanning is foreshadowed when his hand is injured, his credit card declined and he returns from a hit to find the witch in his home drinking wine with his wife. The paranoia felt by the heroes, and us, is exacerbated by usually familiar objects such as a wing mirror, a headlight or a kettle being made unfamiliar by Wheatley filming them from unusual angles and counterpointing them with an incongruous soundtrack of chanting or droning. *Kill List* questions the validity of all the bastions of so-called civilised society - priest, librarian, doctor, MP and, finally, family – and ends by suggesting that the occult is hiding in plain sight.

As Lowenstein points out, Wheatley ensures that we lose our bearings in both spatial and genre terms. He uses space strategically in *Kill List* to create a sense that all is far from well in suburban society, but what renders the film eerie is how its tonal combination of the mundane and the hostile inhabits spaces that are so bland and lonely. There is a sense building throughout the film that there is nothing where there should be something, an absence where there should be a presence. Thus, by the time Jay and Gal witness the climactic occult rites and our worst fears are justified that there is, after all, a something and a presence, we feel as if we can never be re-orientated again. It is too late for anything but unsettlement. Where *Kill List* is most terrifying is in its thoroughgoing destruction of all familiar comforts. The gradual introduction of the supernatural to the everyday adds to its eerie tone: for example in the early dinner party scene when Gal asks 'old world, new world?' he's referring to wine, but the religious and metaphysical subtext is plain. In the face of a contemporary society depicted as simultaneously inscrutable and furtive, the film rejects Christianity in favour of paganism. By linking the supernatural to the mundane, and implying that everyone is in on the joke and the joke is on us, Wheatley makes Jay's Old Testament sacrifice of his own son the ultimate act of self-castration, and an authentic source of primal fear.

In Meadows' *Dead Man's Shoes*, a soldier returns scarred from a different overseas conflict from that in *Kill List*. Outwardly, *Dead Man's Shoes* is a generic revenge thriller chronicling the return of paratrooper Richard (Paddy Considine) from active service overseas - where isn't specified, but we infer Iraq or Afghanistan - to his East Midlands hometown in order to enact revenge upon the local petty criminals who tormented and finally hanged his younger brother Anthony (Toby Kebbell). According to an interview with Mark Kermode (2004), at the time of the film's release, Meadows and Considine, who also co-wrote it, claimed to draw inspiration from James Glickenhaus' 1980 vigilante action film *The Exterminator*. Indeed, in

its reliance on stock elements such as a revenge plot and a series of bloody confrontations, *Dead Man's Shoes* can be read as an exploitation film. However, it is possessed of more originality than its makers imply due to a haunting, unsettling tone achieved through a careful balance of the violent with the lyrical, a combination anchored in a powerful sense of place. From its opening a polarity is established between man and man-made on the one hand, and nature and the seasons on the other. This is crystallised in the early shot (Fig. 1) of the two brothers, one living, one a ghost, walking along a country track next to a drystone wall, which brings together in one bleak space the film's major themes: fraternity, masculinity, love, death. In its use of locations the film alternates the rural with the urban: Richard walks with purpose out of the fields, past discarded farm machinery and an abandoned car, towards the town where his project will unfold. The conflicted nature of the space, on the cusp between country and city, is reflected in his character: he is ceaselessly in motion, ascetic and focused as he eats from a tin with a penknife or sleeps on a pallet in a deserted outhouse. The contrast between this military preparedness for action and the organic presence of the seasons contributes a feeling of the numinous, as for example when Richard materialises out of the hedgerow like a vengeful Jack-in-the-Green, or when his climactic confrontation with the gang's last surviving member takes place on a spring morning at sunrise.



Fig. 1

An analysis of the opening of Meadows' film reveals that its eerie atmosphere is conjured through expert control of composition, pacing and music. To the accompaniment of a wheezing accordion on the soundtrack, music whose dissonance makes the familiar unfamiliar, we see a montage intercutting three strands: firstly, the aforementioned image of two figures walking in a wide shot along a bleak country track beside a drystone wall; secondly, grainy black-and-white footage showing in flashback one of the local gangsters asking Anthony to run an errand for him; thirdly, general views of the terraced houses of a small industrial town, behind which is a backdrop of green fields dominated by what appear to be the crenellations of a ruined castle on the horizon. This bravura opening sets up themes that will resonate throughout the narrative, but it is the sophisticated use of landscape, for example the counterpointing of gothic ruins on the horizon with housing estates in the foreground, that suggests a textured relationship between character and place that is defined by this space being liminal. The opening frames of *Dead Man's Shoes* appear to offer a compositing of different spaces: a street, superimposed on a row of houses, superimposed on a hill, superimposed on a castle. One question prompted by this is: what then lies within these intersections of spaces? The answer might be: the eerie.

Clair Schwarz foregrounds the film's use of uncanny elements:

> This suturing of the vengeance narrative with the horror film is facilitated through the figuring of Richard as a monster. This is manifested physically through his adoption of a military-issue gas mask, a residual signifier of his previous existence as a SAS soldier made strange in the civilian world. Its peculiarity outside a legitimate military situation symbolically underscores that, for Richard, this is a combat situation. The function of the mask here is not protective but uncanny. Indeed, the mask makes Richard strange and frightening; it unsettles those he seeks and manipulates their responses to him. It is more than a mere covering of his face to avoid recognition; it is

> an evocation of the Freudian uncanny through its very particular form and altered function. (2013: 101)

Schwarz's emphasis on the role played by the strange in *Dead Man's Shoes* is valuable, as it points to a subversion central to the film, that its hero is uncanny. Richard's mask unsettles and manipulates not only those he seeks, but us as well. The film weaves displacement into this unsettlement by the balancing of its lack of homeliness with supernatural elements. For Schwarz, this assured balance is what makes the film so distinctive a work:

> *Dead Man's Shoes* thus employs myth and allegory rather than a straightforwardly materialist exploration of the sociopolitical realities of contemporary Britain. The logic of the film deviates from the project of social realism, working instead on the basis of individual agency with an overlay of mystical allegory. (Schwarz, 2013: 105)

Meadows utilises myth and allegory primarily in the revelation that Anthony, the younger brother who accompanies Richard, is a ghost. Linked to this, the community's guilt in his death is implicit from the early shot of a ruined castle upon the horizon above the town, the location, we will later learn, of Anthony's hanging. The shot signifies the first of the film's many hauntings: Anthony is a dead witness but Richard, wracked by guilt for not being there to defend his brother, is a living ghost. His appearance is described by one of the gang members, Herbie (Stuart Wolfenden), as: 'like a ghost, man, right at me!' When he visits vengeance upon sleeping or drugged victims he resembles a gas-masked Sandman, the antagonist of the story which Freud offers as a template of the uncanny. Despite Richard's homicidal actions, we feel pathos and terror at the spiritual dimension of his plight because, while soldiering abroad, his home has symbolically been violated by his brother's murder. Within the film's world there is a lack of any homely space; the only exception is the house occupied by Marie (Jo Hartley), the narrative's sole female character, which implies a

connection between notions of the unhomely, and the unfamiliar, with the specifically masculine. Richard returns to utilise his military skills, incongruously, on the home front, but it is already too late: there is no home left to return to. That is his inheritance, and his only consolation is his own oblivion.

This returns us to Newland's list of national myths, as discussed in the Introduction. The figure of the knight errant constitutes an example of a romantic storybook figure upon which some British films of the new century play variations. Jay and Gal in *Kill List,* Richard in *Dead Man's Shoes* and, as Chapter Seven will discuss in depth, Joseph (Peter Mullan) in *Tyrannosaur* identify as the contemporary descendants, or avatars, of the mediaeval knight. The narratives in which they are situated alternate violence with lyricism to achieve an elegiac tone which confers upon them the status of laments for something lost. This sense of longing is underlined by the disenfranchised male, who appears to operate by a code of honour, recalling knights errant from a bygone age of chivalry. Yet, Wheatley, Meadows and Considine counterpoint this chivalric figure with a twenty-first century post-industrial backdrop, an environment far from what we would imagine a mythic landscape to resemble, creating deliberate incongruity to open up compelling aesthetic and thematic spaces. These contemporary knights errant remain disinherited. Unlike figures from Newland's list of myths, the heroes of these contemporary British films are on a literal and metaphorical journey towards death. So the films' narratives simultaneously exist in an imagined countryside, with its roots in chivalry, and in a contemporary land of the dead, a space that qualifies as eerie. In this way, the films confront Williams' 'actual and bitter contradictions of the time' (2016: 63), and their authentic conclusion is that, as Lowenstein says, 'we are quite literally in the dark' (2016: 7).

As a component of the eerie, the sense of unfamiliarity is crucial to our understanding of the aesthetic project of the contemporary British films under discussion. They exist where there

is a blurring of boundaries, a space defined by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts as edgelands. 'It was a new landscape that made no sense' (2011: 8) is how Farley and Roberts describe their first encounter with the concept of edgelands. For them it is 'a complex landscape, a debatable zone' (2011: 6), while for Murray Smith this interzone represents 'the city's ripped backsides' (2002: 32). The combination of ambiguity and violation in these phrases is reflected in the sense of uncertainty and alienation within the films. This iteration of the eerie as a debatable zone is typified by Marek Losey's 2008 film *The Hide*, a two-hander about Roy (Alex Macqueen) and Dave (Phil Campbell), both fugitives, both guarding secrets, whose paths collide in the eponymous bird-watching hide on the remote Suffolk marshlands. When Dave, who has come to shoot himself in grief over his brother's death, finds out that Roy is not merely a fastidious ornithologist but also a serial killer, he must choose whether to use a bullet on himself or on Roy. The film functions as a highly suspenseful chamber piece as, within an artificial, confined space, each character speaks only in whispers and little by little more grisly information emerges about their true intentions.

Stella Hockenhull's description of *The Hide* as 'simultaneously intimate and bleak' (2014: 103) underlines what identifies it as eerie. It is not a matter of its use of desolate exteriors comprising silhouettes of men, birds or pylons to establish a brooding atmosphere, but rather its use of interiors. So what should be a place of refuge is turned, by means of a charged atmosphere of implicit violence into which gruesome secrets are introduced, into an inhospitable space of menace, in the style of the claustrophobic plays of Harold Pinter. The interleaving of intimate close-ups of the men's faces with their whispering, matter-of-fact voices and the ceaseless background sound from outside of booms, whistles and creaks as the wind connects with the vulnerable structure that is the hide, establishes that what is eerie here is in fact the space between individuals. The hide is located, physically and metaphorically, in

a bleak, liminal space that is a land of the dead, but the heart of the film's sense of apocalypse lies in these desperate, desolate silences between the men.

The similarity between the edgeland spaces which the above-mentioned contemporary British films occupy, and the eerie literary landscapes of Potter and James is, as Macfarlane argues, that they all display the same fascination with unsettlement and displacement. In making this connection between James' ghost stories and contemporary 'eerie counterculture', Macfarlane returns us to Hutchings' manifesto for the British anti-landscape: '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.' (2004: 29) Macfarlane suggests a reason why these works choose to inhabit this liminal land of the dead: 'What is under way, across a broad spectrum of culture, is an attempt to account for the turbulence of England in the era of late capitalism.' (2015) The confluence of culture, turbulence and capitalism returns us to the work of Fisher, whose questions about contemporary society resonate with the British films under discussion. For example, the blurred geographical boundaries along which, for example, *Red Road* and *Kill List* are set function as a visual articulation of Fisher's ideas because the films appear to indeed exist in a strange simultaneity where the present could be the past. The spaces, respectively urban and suburban, of the above-mentioned two films – the estates and high-rises of *Red Road,* the motorways and motels of *Kill List* – are recognisably 1960s constructions which the films are using as real locations. I would argue that the aesthetic result takes Fisher's idea - 'linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity' (2014: 9) – and realises it for cinema. The screen fictions we are experiencing arguably take place simultaneously in both the new century and the 1960s. For Fisher, our response to a contemporary culture which is often indistinguishable from that of the past is inflected with a yearning that he identifies as a nostalgia for a lost future, as articulated in his claim that pop music's obsession with the recent past is a confidence trick: '… the nostalgia

mode subordinated technology to the task of refurbishing the old. The effect was to disguise the disappearance of the future as its opposite.' (2014: 13)

Like Fisher, contemporary British filmmakers of the new century are suggesting that the future has disappeared. They inhabit Hutchings' landscape of dispossession and vacancy, and Macfarlane's place of unsettlement and displacement, and add that we exist in an uncertain present. This is the arena, demarcated by space and time, occupied by the films under discussion. What is characteristic about the aesthetic of the films in their use of the eerie is that they combine a powerful sense of place with a simultaneous withdrawal, or alienation, from that place. Characters within the narratives, and by extension we, are dislocated from the landscapes in which they appear. Part of the films' aesthetic project is to approximate the state of failed mourning for the lost futures in which we exist. This disappeared future has the effect of haunting us, and thus of being eerie.

Eerie-**Pastoral**-Heritage-Epic

CHAPTER TWO

PASTORAL (I): THE SONG OF THE LAND



Witchfinder General (Michael Reeves 1968)

A Cinema of Regret

At the opening of the previous chapter, it was established that the two modes of eerie and pastoral are paradoxically conjoined. Both modes are essential to the discussion in this thesis of contemporary British cinema, because what has been described previously as its shadow strain is rooted within these two modes and grows out of the films' manipulation of them. The analysis in this chapter and the next will add an aspect to what we understand as pastoral. In order to achieve this, it will divide the argument into two sections, set in different time-frames of British cinema. It will devote this chapter to a consideration of the treatment of pastoral in landscape by two British films of the 1970s, *Witchfinder General* and *Winstanley*. It is necessary to look at these two earlier films because of their role in laying the foundations for the subversion of the pastoral mode in British films of the new century. Having considered the location and subversion of the pastoral mode in these two historical dramas, Chapter Three will move on to a discussion of approaches to the pastoral mode in three British films of the new century: *A Field in England*, which like the preceding two films takes the English Civil War as its setting, and two contemporary-set films, *The Selfish Giant* and *Dark River*.

There is a consensus that there is difficulty in defining the pastoral. Sue Harper points to its importance when she reflects that 'pastoralism runs like a leitmotiv through most British cultural forms – except the cinema' (2010: 149) and that 'the most intense and resonant use of landscape tends to occur on the margins of mainstream British film production.' (2010: 158) While in agreement that the films under discussion, which fall into Harper's category of being on the margins of mainstream British film production, do indeed use landscape in a way that is intense and resonant, this chapter and the next will argue that pastoralism runs through them as much as other cultural forms. This links to the films presenting what Hutchings describes as 'a cinematic aesthetic which acknowledges a lost pastoral tradition' (2004: 5), which returns us to the discussion in the Introduction about contemporary British films drawing on earlier cinematic and literary traditions. In his consideration of the development of English national history and culture, Williams adds to the debate: '… the first problem of definition, a persistent problem of form, is the question of pastoral, of what is known as pastoral.' (2016: 17) This chapter and the next will address this 'question of pastoral' and consider how British cinema of the new century embodies Williams' definition of the pastoral. Beyond this, itwill demonstrate how this develops it into a variant on the pastoral, the mode of the anti-pastoral, and how this mode is synthesised with the eerie towards a unifying aesthetic dynamic that questions the idea of what a heritage landscape is. It will conclude by reflecting that these two strands, the eerie which subverts the familiar, and the pastoral which converts into the anti-pastoral, lay the foundations for Hutchings' 'British anti-landscape' (2004: 29) and for the pestilence in the ditch.

It is appropriate to begin by considering ways in which the five films mentioned above both conform to and deviate from notions of the pastoral, as principally explored in the work of Williams. The opposition of pastoral and counter-pastoral, for Williams, finds traction in our collective denial or misremembrance of the brutality of historical eras, primarily the

parliamentary enclosures and the Industrial Revolution. The Introduction drew an analogy between the literature under consideration by Williams, which he describes in the phrase: 'The poems to the happy tenant, the idealised and independent self of the reflective pastoral tradition, are succeeded by poems of loss, change, regret' (2016: 96), and the films under consideration in this thesis. Tonally these can also be categorised as 'poems of loss, change, regret'. For example, in each of *Red Road, Dead Man's Shoes, Fish Tank* and *Tyrannosaur*, nature manifests as an irruption into predominantly urban spaces of either the animal (foxes, dogs, horses) or the pastoral (fields, hedgerows, rivers). These irruptions offer fleeting poetic moments which, in their stark contrast with the liminal, man-made zones wherein the rest of the action plays out, serve to amplify our overall sense of dislocation. In a wider sense, these poetic flourishes can be read as the survival of a lost pastoral tradition. Thematically, the films are preoccupied with loss, change, regret. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Dead Man's Shoes* is a lament for the loss of Richard's brother Anthony, his home and, ultimately, his life. Jackie (Kate Dickie) and Mia (Katie Jarvis), the respective protagonists of *Red Road* and *Fish Tank*, undergo cathartic change on their way to processing family crises.

Considine's *Tyrannosaur*, which Chapter Seven will analyse in terms of its subversion of the epic mode, is suffused in particular with a tone of regret: for the unravelling certainties of family, for the life not lived and for the choices not made. In its exploration of the remorse felt by its protagonist Joseph (Peter Mullan) over how he failed his late wife and the resulting state of spiritual limbo in which he exists, *Tyrannosaur* carries specific echoes of a celebrated poem of regret, Thomas Hardy's 'After a Journey' (1912). Hardy's elegy begins with the line 'Hereto I come to view a voiceless ghost', and concludes with 'I am just the same as when/Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers.' While separated by almost exactly a century, it is fruitful to reflect how Considine's film connects with Hardy's poem on several levels: thematically, both deal with male selves haunted by ghosts of women; formally, both

are elegies; geographically, both equate an outer, physical landscape with an inner, emotional transformation. But whereas for Hardy rural Cornwall unlocks memories of a courtship that took place forty-two years previously, for Considine the landscape of inner-city Leeds has the opposite effect on Joseph, imprisoning him literally and psychologically to the extent that as atonement for his own failure he must save the female protagonist, Hannah (Olivia Colman), from an abusive relationship. Tonally, *Tyrannosaur* is a contemporary film that functions precisely as a poem of loss, change, regret. Alongside *Dead Man's Shoes, Red Road* and *Fish Tank,* it signals a conscious departure from Williams' 'reflective pastoral tradition'. Instead of reassuring us, it amplifies our overall sense of dislocation. This tone of regret is effectively translated in the films into an aesthetic which acknowledges a lost pastoral tradition, but also moves forwards from it.

Puncturing the Pastoral

This leads to the question, what is being regretted here? The films echo Williams' warning of the dangers of believing in 'the recurrent myth of a happier and more natural past' (2016: 56). They contain a reaction against any idealisation of landscape to the extent that, in films such as *Sightseers* and *Catch Me Daddy*, landscape becomes an abstract space through which killers move. In effect, these are films from which the past has been jettisoned. British films of the new century are permeated by the idea of there being a true history that needs uncovering, and this lies at the heart of their rejection of the pastoral. For filmmakers such as Arnold, Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley, an important shared aesthetic is the primacy of authenticity, a motive that prompts the refusal of idealisation of either character, society or landscape. If the films' primary goal is to be truthful, an interpretation of their makers' intentions would be to view their work as authentic chronicles of contemporary Britain out of which the countryside, or landscape, emerges as a land of the dead. That many of the films under discussion concern marginalised characters in economically deprived

regions is a decision born from the deliberate choice not to idealise. This returns us to Williams' statement: 'An idealisation, based on a temporary situation and on a deep desire for stability, served to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time.' (2016: 63) This thesis argues that it is the project of these films, in their above-mentioned mission to be true histories, to cover and evade no longer, but instead to actively engage with the 'bitter contradictions of the time'. It is no accident that these films share a tone of abiding bitterness or that they function, cinematically speaking, as 'poems of loss, change, regret'. This is because they are rejecting the pastoral tradition in favour of mapping new spaces, which in turn become the British anti-landscape.

A more accurate description of this variant on the pastoral is its opposite, the anti-pastoral. The metaphor of the map is appropriate when bearing in mind that the films inhabit a landscape that we have established is unfamiliar and eerie, as for the filmmakers it is a different landscape from the idealised, inauthentic one that has been presented previously. According to Farley and Roberts, we need to 'put aside our nostalgia for places we've never really known' (2011: 10). With this in mind, the filmmakers' role is as cartographers of places we've never really known, creating empathetic connections to places we have not been. For Macfarlane, an important aspect of what he terms the 'new landscape aesthetic' is 'a puncturing of the pastoral' (2015). By this he means that previously held ideas relating to the pastoral, idealising the landscape as a romantic or idyllic space, are now subject to interrogation and reinterpretation. This notion is echoed by writer Ashley Pharaoh, when describing his supernatural television drama series *The Living and the Dead* (BBC 2016) as an exploration of 'the skull beneath the skin of the English pastoral' (2016). Both phrases are underpinned by the idea that the pastoral is an untruth, and in this respect they accord with Williams' statement about 'the recurrent myth of a happier and more natural past' (2016: 56). By using imagery – puncturing, skull and skin - that physically evokes violence and

mortality, Macfarlane and Pharaoh further imply that only by an act of force, of breaking through a façade, will we be disabused of our attachment to the pastoral. So in order for the films to qualify as true histories, they must grapple with bitter contradictions, and as a consequence of this they can be seen to subvert or take a stance against the pastoral - or both.

Hockenhull identifies the achievement in this area of two literary adaptations both released in 2011, *Wuthering Heights* and Cary Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre*. She comments on the films' 'wild, rugged landscapes devoid of the picturesque traits of their predecessors, instead evoking a sense of menace wrought from these settings.' (2016: 149) For Hockenhull, and for the discussion of the films in this thesis, it is paramount that we the spectators are being made to experience landscape as not picturesque but threatening. In examining the films' rejection of the pastoral, she draws on the work of Higson:

> Gone are the idyllic English pastoral scenes that present images suitable for National Trust frontispieces. Instead the spectator is presented with the harsh realities of rural life in the nineteenth century, with the countryside relating more to what Andrew Higson terms 'dirty realism': an expression that describes films that recount mediaeval England and that possess 'a fuller sense of mise-en-scene, lighting and cinematography … it is not simply that the landscape becomes bleaker, the dwellings more austere, and the streets, lanes and villages filthier. England/Britain generally becomes a far more dangerous place to inhabit; it is closer to nature, more primitive, less civilised.' (2016: 148-9)

In relating the films' depiction of landscape to Higson's dirty realism, Hockenhull firstly confirms that their aesthetic project aligns with Williams' assertion, as previously discussed, that the true history of the English countryside lies 'in the problems of property in land, and in the consequent social and working relationships.' (2016: 85) Secondly, her identification

of these spaces as not only dirty, but dangerous, further distances us from notions of an idealised past and of the pastoral tradition. This identification of the picturesque as a mode to be resisted chimes with the ambivalence shown towards it by other scholars such as Hutchings, who calls for a different definition of the British cinematic landscape by pointing to the 'menacing cityscapes and landscapes' (2004: 28) that reflect a less commercial side of British cinema. This is the side that constitutes the dark heritage of British cinema, and is where we find the pestilence in the ditch.

Hutchings contrasts film and television which foreground a 'suppression of the picturesque and touristic' (27). For example, in Nigel Kneale's dystopian *Quatermass* series, in a tone of high seriousness scientists, civilians and the military engage with the threat of alien invasion. He cites as the opposite the romantic comedy *Notting Hill*, which airbrushes multiculturalism out of its locale to present a prettified, inauthentic version of West London. Hutchings positions himself against critics who: '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.' (29) By stressing that the appearance of uniformity and unity is a deception, and allying them instead to the inherent disparateness of regional identities, Hutchings probes at ideas of nationhood. He also counterpoints the privileging of Britishness or Englishness, as emblematised in British cinema, with the diasporic quality of the United Kingdom. This implication that national unity is a deception relates to the presentation of landscape by the films under discussion. It intersects with Williams' argument, which is that a national tradition of melancholy began in the vacuum left after a period of British history that we falsely perceive to have been idyllic, and that this change of mood arises from the transition of pastoral into counter-pastoral. So the dark heritage of contemporary British cinema is a continuation of Williams' tradition of

melancholy. This aesthetic texture, defined by its ambivalence towards the pastoral, lends the films their distinctive identity.

The work of the above-mentioned scholars shows them in dispute with conventional notions of the pictorial and the picturesque, a stance that is reflected by the films under discussion. The picturesque is described by novelist China Mieville as 'A propaganda of the English imaginary' (2016) in an article on what he perceives as its frequently subversive treatment in British art and literature. Mieville's attitude, that the past and the pastoral are founded upon a lie, is one that accords with British films of the new century. It finds another articulation in Fisher's analysis of John Constable's celebrated 1821 painting 'The Hay Wain':

> Constable's supposedly timeless painting of English landscape ceases to be a kind of pastoral screensaver and becomes what it always really was: a snapshot of agricultural labour. Far from being some refuge from political strife, the English landscape is the site of numerous struggles between the forces of power and privilege and those who sought to resist them. (2014: 225)

Fisher's analysis of the Constable painting applies to the films of this thesis in two ways, the visual and the political. Firstly, 'screensaver' and 'snapshot' connote imagery generated by a camera, but imagery that is defined by its limitations, by what is excluded, demanding that we infer more from the carefully chosen frame offered to us. A screensaver and a snapshot are also without value, ephemeral and, ironically, not actually looked at. The ideas behind Fisher's pastoral screensaver and Mieville's propaganda of the picturesque are the same as those expressed, for example, in *Sightseers* and *Catch Me Daddy*. These ideas are namely: what if the English landscape is not a postcard, but instead a disturbing space through which killers move?

Secondly, by the example of Constable's painting, Fisher asks us to consider the landscape not as an idyllic place of refuge but as a theatre of conflict, specifically that between rich and poor . It would add the important distinction here that the moral bias of contemporary British films lies not with the 'forces of power and privilege' but with 'those who sought to resist them'. A constant in the films under discussion, which span the period between *Dead Man's Shoes* in 2004 and *Dark River* in 2017, is that power, money and status are conspicuous by their absence from their narratives. The dominant sense is of characters who have been marginalised by a mainstream society which exhibits an indifference to their voices and actions. This is reflected in the films' prominent use of post-industrial landscapes, such as the contemporary Yorkshire of *The Selfish Giant, Catch Me Daddy* and *Dark River*. The scale of these films' pylons, moorland motorways and abandoned farms throws into ironic relief the truth that power has abandoned these places and, by implication, the people who live there. This sense of abandonment, as discussed in the previous chapter, renders the films' spaces eerie, and also defines their stance as an anti-pastoral one. The films have moved past Constable's 'The Hay-Wain' to become anti-pastoral: feature-length screensavers, moving snapshots that explicitly concern themselves with the absence of power.

By defining the English landscape not as a rural idyll but as a conflicted space, Fisher also allies himself to Williams' thesis: 'The true history of the English countryside has been centred throughout in the problems of property in land, and in the consequent social and working relationships.' (2016: 85) This points to an emergent idea of there being a 'true history' that needs uncovering. The films under discussion grapple with this, and it lies at the heart of contemporary British films' questioning and, ultimately, rejection of the pastoral as a mode. For filmmakers such as Arnold, Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley who emphasise the primacy of authenticity, an artistic imperative demands that their films be the antithesis of 'poems to the happy tenant', and prompts in consequence the refusal of the

idealisation of character, landscape or society. This links to Williams' concluding definition of pastoral:

> The song of the land, the song of rural labour, the song of delight in the many forms of life with which we all share our physical world, is too important and too moving to be tamely given up, in an embittered betrayal, to the confident enemies of all significant and actual independence and renewal. (2016: 391)

This statement anticipates the tonal ambiguities that resound throughout the films in this study. These ambiguities grow from their shared sense of powerlessness, disenfranchisement and opposition to more confident and entitled enemies.

What precisely is the song to which Williams refers, and which his rhetoric implies must be safeguarded? It is a 'song of the land' that manifests in the work of Andrea Arnold, for example, as the sudden and incongruous proximity of nature, in *Red Road* the cry of a fox outside a high-rise, in *Fish Tank* the incongruous appearance of a wild horse in urban edgelands (Fig. 1), and in *Wuthering Heights* the texture of a lapwing's feather in contrast to the human pain surrounding it. In *The Selfish Giant* it is the survival of the Traveller tradition of road races on the roads of contemporary Bradford, and in *Dark River* it is Alice's (Ruth Wilson) facility with the pastoral craft of sheep-shearing in the context of a modern working farm. The setting of these elements within an outer framework of brutally realistic depictions of urban and rural poverty signals Arnold's and Barnard's aesthetic as a refusal to 'tamely' give up, or worse still betray, what for them as for Williams is most precious: the true pastoral, a metaphorical music that unites land, labour and delight. If we interpret Williams' 'song' as poetry itself, it follows that the aesthetic project of the films under discussion is to achieve some kind of poetic state. However, they achieve this by means of authenticity, by

presenting true histories, not ‘embittered betrayals’. The refusal of idealisation is the artists’ means, and independence and renewal are their end.



Fig. 1

From this it can be argued that, across a concentration of contemporary British films, what appears to be a rejection and subversion of the pastoral is at heart the filmmakers’ testing the truthfulness of its representation. The protagonists of the films exist on the margins of society or are fugitives from its laws. That which they most devoutly desire – personal fulfilment, justice, an idyllic domestic existence - is shown to be false or at the very least unattainable, and its place is taken by a violent, retributive spirit which, while rebarbative, is more truthful. This call for a defence of the pastoral, which is present in Williams, is central to the vision of landscape of the contemporary filmmakers under discussion, as a means to restore the pastoral to what they see as its rightful, truthful, place in poetry. The social and aesthetic ferocity of the films arises from their approach to both content and style, the former typified by graphic use of sex, violence and language, and the latter by techniques such as the casting of actors rather than stars, and the use of improvised dialogue and hand-held camerawork. It is a ferocity founded upon a commitment to the avoidance of idealisation and the refusal of tameness. It might lead to a reading of the films as actively taking a stance against the pastoral. Instead the reverse is true: the films are giving us their version of Williams’ ‘song of

the land'. They are poems of loss, change, regret, translated into a cinema that is not pastoral, but anti-pastoral.

The Site of Numerous Struggles

Before the analysis in the next chapter of contemporary British films that make explicit their ambivalence towards notions of the pastoral, it will first be productive to reflect on the significance of two British films of the 1970s, *Witchfinder General* and *Winstanley.* These films' aesthetic with regard to the pastoral is shaped by their choice of setting, the English Civil War of the seventeenth century, and by their shared project to reinterpret traditional notions of the pastoral.

It has been established in the first part of this chapter that, for scholars such as Williams and Fisher as well as for contemporary British filmmakers, the true identity of the countryside has its basis in political conflict. For Williams, 'The true history of the English countryside has been centred throughout in the problems of property in land, and in the consequent social and working relationships.' (2016: 85) Fisher traces the source of conflict within the countryside and reaches a similar conclusion: 'Far from being some refuge from political strife, the English landscape is the site of numerous struggles between the forces of power and privilege and those who sought to resist them.' (2014: 225) Both statements imply that the idea of the pastoral is a lie, and that the key to understanding the English, or British, landscape is social context. A major social and political upheaval in British history that provides a suitable canvas upon which to explore these struggles is the series of armed conflicts in 1642-51 known as the English Civil War. These can be read as a literal enactment of Williams' contention that: 'the great problem of English rural history is the endless complication of intermediate classes: between the feudal lord and the serf; between the great landowner and the hired landless labourer.' (2016: 56) This clash between landowner and labourer is

encapsulated by the Civil War's conflict between, on the one hand, Royalists or Cavaliers and, on the other, Parliamentarians or Roundheads. Such an ideological conflict between 'the forces of power and privilege and those who sought to resist them' offers an overturning of the social order against a backdrop of the fields of England. It accordingly provides thematically rich territory for films like *Witchfinder General, Winstanley* and *A Field in England* because of the dramatic and aesthetic resonances afforded by the thematic gap between pastoral lyricism and violent unrest made available by this historical conflict. Additionally, the Civil War is an opportunity for the films to engage with landscape as a means of subverting the pastoral into the alternative mode of anti-pastoral.

Due to its haunting use of the English landscape, Michael Reeves' 1968 horror film *Witchfinder General* is an important cinematic antecedent of, and correlative to, the contemporary British films under discussion. Echoing the roles of the past for Williams and of the picturesque for Mieville, Julian Petley describes it as a film that: 'painted a highly disturbing picture of the English past, one that ruthlessly ripped aside the cosy clichés so assiduously cultivated both by school textbooks and the tourist industry.' (2017: 122) Anticipating both the importance placed by Fisher on the role of time, and Hutchings' idea of the British anti-landscape, Petley cites Tom Milne's contemporaneous reviews of *Witchfinder General*: 'Throughout the whole film there is a vivid sense of time out of joint … a canker spreads incurably through England's green and pleasant land; and the delicate patchwork of green fields and forests is gradually shot through with the colours of blood and decay.' (1968)

As discussed in the Introduction, Blake's 'Jerusalem' is again invoked to point to the illusion of 'England's green and pleasant land', but Milne's phrase also finds an echo in Rob Young's consideration of the redefinition of British landscape by historical films of the 1960s and 70s: 'the great age of period drama … is one of muted greens and umbers, mud, filth, grey skies and rain, where landscape is more than simply picturesque backcloth.' (2010: 17) This

pinpoints a cultural moment where conventional screen depictions of the pastoral begin to be rejected by filmmakers. While more pastorally traditional approaches to the English landscape in contemporaneous films such as *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (Ken Hughes, 1968), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (Tony Richardson, 1968), and *Mary, Queen of Scots* (Charles Jarrott, 1971) continue to flourish, Young proposes that an alternative mode is being tested by films such as *Witchfinder General, Alfred the Great* (Clive Donner, 1969) and *Winstanley*. This alternative mode can now be recognised as the emergence of anti-pastoral as a valid way of reading landscape. Milne's phrase, set alongside the writing of David Pirie, Iain Sinclair, Benjamin Halligan and Paul Bayley, is illuminating about *Witchfinder General*, but the 'colours of blood and decay' persist in the contemporary British cinema of this study. They are especially to be seen in the work of Wheatley, for example the interplay in *Sightseers* and *A Field in England* between gallows humour, action, nature and violence. In his discussion of eerie counterculture, Macfarlane argues for the status of *Witchfinder General* in the hinterland of films, including *A Field in England*, which he identifies as eerie: 'the contemporary eerie feeds off its earlier counterparts … A renewed interest in classics of the tradition is in evidence.' (2015)

The use of pastoral in *Witchfinder General* is in evidence as the film opens, with imagery of sheep in the Suffolk landscape. This is overlaid by the sound of distant, rhythmic knocking, which is in turn revealed to come from a wooden mallet, which a labourer is using to erect a gallows. The low-angle shot of the gallows silhouetted on the green hillside is the first of many images in the film which situate death within nature, and thereby achieve an effect that juxtapose the eerie with the pastoral. In the opening sequence, the next image is of a woman being dragged by villagers to be hanged as a witch, surrounded by a cluster of people led by a local priest reading from the Bible. This opening qualifies as a definitive example of the eerie in landscape, in that there is a presence where there should be an

absence. The first sight of the gallows on the horizon shocks and disorients in its unexpectedness. Itcounterpoints natural with unnatural sounds, for example when the organic atmospheres of birdsong, sheep and wind are drowned out by the woman's screams and the priest's chanting. When thisclimaxes in the snap of the hanging rope as it goes taut before silence resumes, it is an indication of the indifference of both crowd and nature to the act they have just witnessed.

Of this sensational, and effective, opening sequence David Pirie writes:

> The pure natural beauty of the Suffolk countryside (the light forms a natural cross through the trees) is contrasted with the violence and brutality of the human activity within it (the creaking of the wood reminds us that the gibbet is made from one of the oak trees). (2008: 171)

Pirie identifies the key technique of *Witchfinder General* as the juxtaposition of the violent and the lyrical to create a tension that communicates the film's theme, ambivalence about the concept of human goodness. Set in 1645 Suffolk against the backdrop of the Civil War, on the surface this is a luridly commercial horror film of its times, telling a conventional story of good versus evil that pits Richard Marshall (Ian Ogilvy), a resolute trooper in Cromwell's army, against Matthew Hopkins (Vincent Price), the eponymous witchfinder whose religious crusade to torture and execute suspected accomplices of the Devil is a mask for sexual exploitation and financial gain. A clue to the film's real nature, that it is a narrative of some moral complexity, comes in the transition in its final third into a vigilante thriller as Marshall, maddened by Hopkins' rape of his fiancée, rides back and forth across the East Anglian countryside hunting his prey until, in the dungeon of Orford Castle, he corners Hopkins and dismembers him with an axe. What makes the film's ending not merely horrific but also haunting is the way it uses landscape as a locus for these brutal acts to suggest a setting that is

not pastoral but its opposite, anti-pastoral, recalling Fisher's and Williams' point that the landscape is not one of refuge, but of strife. In a radio interview, Iain Sinclair describes *Witchfinder General* as an 'argument between the English pastoral … and unscripted brutal violence', identifying it as a film that 'really takes on landscape to reveal the underlying sense of psychotic breakdown' (2013). This sense of disintegration connects with Williams' sense of the disappearance of the 'idealised and independent self of the reflective pastoral tradition' (2016: 96). The pastoral is replaced by the underlying presence of violence, and in this the aesthetic of Reeves' film anticipates that of the contemporary films in this study.

Contrasted to this, however, is Pirie's more optimistic view:

> The English countryside is a major thematic and symbolic constituent of the structure of *Witchfinder General*. Many other horror filmmakers have juxtaposed natural beauty with human depravity, but Reeves goes much further in contriving to make the natural scenery and its rootedness a strong *positive* force against the shifting nomadic evil of the characters; in this respect the film is almost mystical and pantheistic. (2008: 173)

It is arguable that Pirie is over-simplifying, but more than making the English countryside stand for good against humanity's evil, Reeves instead uses its natural beauty to represent order against the chaos wrought not only by Hopkins but by the political upheaval of the Civil War. From the film's beginning, a series of jarring contrasts of the idyllic with the menacing serves to foreshadow a sense that evil will inevitably triumph over good: the cross-fade from the lovemaking of Richard and Sara (Hilary Dwyer) to the approach of the antagonists Hopkins and his henchman Stearne (Robert Russell), or the cut from the pastoral tableau of Sara feeding ducks to the man waiting in the copse to rape her. An idyllic compositionof villagers gathered by the roadside at dusk is underlaid by malevolence: the

community is in fact awaiting the witchfinder, who they themselves have summoned and who will wreak so much havoc. And the dashing, picturesque Cromwellian soldier galloping through sunlit fields to Paul Ferris' swirling, lyrical music is in fact a man driven by homicidal vengeance. From its opening scene of a gallows being erected and a witch being hanged, *Witchfinder General* makes us aware that the life lived in this countryside is not idyllic but harrowing, and the resulting tone, rather than mystical or pantheistic, might more accurately be described as melancholy. Accordingly, what distinguishes *Witchfinder General* from other commercial horror films is the air of loss and longing conferred upon it by this tone of melancholy. This gives the film its haunting quality, to which the historical setting of the Civil War adds pathos because, in the maelstrom of this social upheaval, it is possible to see enacted the indifference of the forces of power and privilege to the fate of individuals at the hands of a rogue like Hopkins.

In this respect the film's choice of historical backdrop takes it as close to social realism as to horror, which raises the question of the role played by generic hybridity in its influence on later British films. Reflecting on the death of Reeves at the age of twenty-five, Pirie issues a kind of challenge to later filmmakers:

> The experience of watching *Witchfinder General* now is almost unbearably poignant … but if the work of Reeves has begun to assume a kind of Keatsian aura it may not be just because of his death but because he was the kind of filmmaker which the British cinema needed (and still in 2007 needs) so desperately badly: someone who could merge the popular tradition of the horror film with more avant-garde concerns without rearing the curious bastard which so often results from such experiments. (2008: 174)

Pirie's notion of British cinema as an experiment that might rear a 'curious bastard' is worth considering because of the light it sheds on contemporary British films and on the role within them of hybridity. For Clair Schwarz, *Dead Man's Shoes* is 'an object of indecipherable bastardry' (2013: 95). This is demonstrated by how the film places eerie edgeland spaces and pastoral lyricism together within the plot of a revenge thriller. As will be seen in Chapters Four and Five, *Wuthering Heights* and *Sightseers* offer further evidence that others of the films under discussion qualify as hybrids, in that they merge genre with Pirie's 'more avant-garde concerns'. However, they do so successfully.

With regards to this, it is instructive to consider how two contemporary British genre hybrids, *Dead Man's Shoes* and *Kill List*, are successful in their hybridisation because they manage to integrate generic horror tropes, such as axe-wielding vigilantes and human sacrifice, within wider metaphysical examinations of time and guilt. Both concern themselves, as does *Witchfinder General*, with killers moving through abstract spaces, but it is notable that Meadows and Wheatley replace the pastoral Suffolk of Reeves' film with a man-made landscape, a liminal zone between country and city consisting of small-town estates and motorway flyovers. Therefore, generic hybridity becomes distilled as spatial liminality, an important relationship both in the contemporary films' artistic cohesiveness and in their development of the anti-pastoral strain explored in *Witchfinder General*.

Moreover, in relation to the films' use of the pastoral mode, in both *Dead Man's Shoes* and *Kill List* liminality reinforces the films' sense of disharmony. Nature manifests as a possible refuge for the disenfranchised soldiers, but proves only a temporary stopover on a journey towards a climax of apocalyptic violence. Richard in *Dead Man's Shoes* plots his revenge from an abandoned outhouse on a farm, and Jay and Gal in *Kill List* skin and cook a rabbit in the nocturnal wooded grounds of an MP's mansion while waiting to carry out their final hit. In neither film is there any sense that nature welcomes the men: they do not belong in this

space but are instead interlopers, murderers rather than the shepherds and farmers of the pastoral tradition. This is a further illustration of the desire of the films under discussion to distance themselves from the idealisation of the past, expressed in their characters' being alienated from nature, rather than at one with it. What status they have is literally on the edge of things, in a liminal space. These contemporary British films show the influence of *Witchfinder General* in their preoccupation with violent vigilantes or mercenaries against the backdrop of a landscape suffused by Sinclair's 'underlying sense of psychotic breakdown'. It is important, however, to make the distinction that, in these films of the new century, space is no longer Pirie's positive force against the characters' 'shifting nomadic evil', but its accomplice. Fifty years later, Hopkins and Stearne, the antagonists of *Witchfinder General*, have become Jay and Gal, the anti-heroes of *Kill List*.

A Lack of Order in the Land Encourages Strange Ideas

In an early scene of *Witchfinder General*, the coming violence is foreshadowed by the priest Lowes (Rupert Davies) when, over dinner at his house in the Suffolk town of Brandeston, he warns the young protagonists Richard and Sara that 'a lack of order in the land encourages strange ideas'. In the context of the narrative, his words paint a picture both of the shifting political landscape of the Civil War and of the destructive forces of superstition about to be set in motion. But the phrase can also be applied on a wider, cinematic level to the freedom afforded to the filmmakers who choose the English Civil War as a period setting, suggesting that the lawlessness of the time liberates them artistically to explore strange ideas. Macfarlane underlines the attraction for artists that this particular period holds: 'the preoccupation of eerie culture with the English Civil War … a historical moment in which, as Wheatley puts it, the country was 'so radicalised that normal people were forced into political positions they had never been in before'.' (2015) Echoing these views, *Winstanley* and *A Field in England* look at normal people radicalised by a historical moment and make aesthetic use of this lack

of order in the land. Both films subvert the pastoral mode, and both are more explicitly political than *Witchfinder General* to function as dissections of the British class system within rural locations that are at once idyllically and authentically depicted. They differ, however, in their conclusions regarding the individual's place within the collective.

Paul Newland writes of *Winstanley* that it is 'a bleak, austere film that shows the harsh existence of early-modern rural English communities.' (2013: 138) For him 'it does not sit easily within orthodox categories of cinema' (139) but he acknowledges its achievement: 'What the film certainly does do is bring to life a tradition of radical politics of the left in Britain that can be traced back many generations.' (142) *Winstanley*, like *Witchfinder General,* is based on a real-life figure from seventeenth-century history, Gerrard Winstanley, leader of the community in rural Surrey known as the Diggers whose ideal was to live off the common land. In Brownlow and Mollo's film the pacifism, righteousness and bloody-mindedness of Winstanley (Miles Halliwell) and his followers lead to conflict with figureheads of army and church, personified by Lord Fairfax (Jerome Willis) and Parson Platt (David Bramley), as well as with the more extreme sect of dissenters known as the Ranters. Narrative set-pieces of confrontations taking place in London courtrooms or on Surrey heathlands are linked by the device of Winstanley's voiceover reading statements written by the real historical character, such as: 'O England … I do truly love your peace', 'it is a stain on the Christian religion in England that there is so much waste land, and so many starve for want', and 'England is a prison … the lawyers are the jailers, and poor men are the prisoners'. What emerges from Winstanley's language in these documents is a democratic vision of what England should be: a land of harmony, plenty and equality. Centuries before Williams and Fisher, Winstanley's stance is explicitly anti-capitalist, and his vision of England is, quintessentially, a pastoral one. He sees his project, which is to till a small area of rural land and live off it, as harming no one. However, touching on what Williams describes

as ‘the problems of property in land’ (2016: 85), it is doomed to failure. In this respect, *Winstanley* can be read as an exact dramatisation of Fisher’s thesis that the true history of the English landscape is sited in the struggles between the forces of power and privilege, and those seeking to resist them.

From its opening shot, contrasting thistles in the foreground with soldiers in the background of the same frame, space in *Winstanley* is treated as simultaneously pastoral and kinetic. Accurate representations of the realities of living in nature recur throughout as a motif, from leafless trees to tree roots, from rain on oak leaves to the Diggers’ soggy, hand-built shelters. Winstanley’s retort to Fairfax’s men is ‘let nature disperse us.’ It is the pastoral idyll, in the form of a successful communion between nature and society, that is reflected in Winstanley’s stated intention to ‘lay the foundation of making the earth a common treasury for all, both rich and poor’. These words articulate the democratic politics of man, film and, through Winstanley’s mystical faith in the notion of fair ownership of the land, the nation’s actual earth. In its preoccupation with the land, and its exploration of the pull between the needs of the community and of the individual, between the separate spaces of civilisation and of the wilderness, *Winstanley* demonstrates an unexpected affinity with that most American of genres, the Western. Winstanley is an English version of a frontiersman building a new community and, in the film’s careful attention to historical detail and focus on the dynamic within a small group trying to create a home in the wilderness, it shares the attributes of a John Ford film documenting the expansion west, such as *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) or *Wagon Master* (1950). The central figure of the outlaw also aligns *Winstanley* with an archetype readily associated with the Western. When the Ranters make their rowdy entrance we are presented with the unlikely spectacle of a scene from a British historical drama showing a clash between two bands of outlaws that is more familiar from an American Western. Newland notes the affinity of *Winstanley* with the Western genre:

> it is not beyond the realms of possibility to read the film as an English western, influenced by European silent cinema. Gerrard Winstanley and his band of Diggers, after all, are pioneer settlers trying to create a kind of new frontier, making the best out of a hostile, barren landscape. They find themselves under attack from foes who claim ownership of the land. Shots of horsemen traversing the wilderness appear uncannily familiar. (2013: 139-40)

The film draws equally on a specifically British outlaw mythology of Romantic renegades such as the British outlaws Robin Hood and Adam Bell. Riders are revealed on the horizon or within the pattern of the landscape, or a column of soldiers approaching on horseback recalls the cavalry of Ford's films. Ultimately, the achievement of Brownlow and Mollo's combination of rainy and windy English scenery with the iconography of the Western is its vivid creation of a cinematic texture holding action and repose in balance, which both allows for and subverts notions of the pastoral.



Winstanley: an English western

This subversion of the pastoral can be attributed to *Winstanley*'s use of contrasts. The tableau of the court martial execution that takes place outdoors is framed by trees and, as with *Witchfinder General*, within the same frame a tension is created between death and nature,

between the violent and the lyrical. Dangers constantly beset the Diggers' self-made idyll as evidenced by the unpredictable attacks upon them by brutal weather, soldiers and Ranters. The filmmakers use natural sounds such as birdsong and wind to mask the approach of danger, taking both the Diggers and us by surprise. Because of the suddenness of these violent incursions, there is little true repose in this idyll. The film's subversion of the pastoral even encompasses the hypocritical pillar of society, Parson Platt, who plots against Winstanley from the safe space of his enclosed garden. Although this is property rather than common land, it is no less pretty for that. By this logic, the film asks, does the pastoral become immoral? By the end of *Winstanley* the Diggers are fragmented and their leader's dream of a communal utopia has been compromised by infighting and by the anarchic Ranters. Winstanley's central, anti-capitalist question to the authorities remains unanswered: 'what would you do if you had not such labouring men to work for you?' In this, the film supports Williams' idea that there is a 'true history of the English countryside' (2016: 85). Winstanley's final wish approximates an open-ended answer: 'Whether England shall be the first land, or some other, wherein truth shall sit down in triumph …' This returns us to the project of authenticity, previously identified as a key aspect of the approach to landscape of the contemporary British films under discussion. By seeking to be true histories as opposed to 'embittered portrayals', Winstanley's goal emerges as the same as that of British films of the new century: to be a country 'wherein truth shall sit down in triumph'.

This chapter has discussed the importance of the key concept of the pastoral in the work of scholars such as Williams, Fisher and Macfarlane, and demonstrated its mutation and hybridisation in British films both of the 1970s and of the twenty-first century. Central to the films' treatment of the pastoral mode is its transformation into a new mode that questions any idealisation or falsification of the past by means of landscape. This new mode is identified as

anti-pastoral, and the next chapter will analyse its manifestation across three contemporary British films.

Eerie-**Pastoral**-Heritage-Epic

CHAPTER THREE

PASTORAL (II): REVELATORY SHADOWS



The Selfish Giant (Clio Barnard, 2013)

This Is Your Country, Is It Not?

The discussion of the role of pastoral in the treatment of landscape in certain British films of the twenty-first century has focused on the legacy of two earlier British films, *Witchfinder General* and *Winstanley*. In the previous chapter, it was established that an important element of these films' subversion of the pastoral mode is the role played in them by landscape, not as a site for a rural idyll but as a locus of fear, violence and, above all, truth. This aesthetic project to tell the truth and not to idealise the past lays the foundations of a new mode that opposes, but is related to, pastoral: the anti-pastoral. This chapter will now move on to consider the subversion of the pastoral mode, and its development into anti-pastoral, in the contemporary British films *A Field in England*, *The Selfish Giant* and *Dark River*.

In Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England* there is a overwhelming sense of landscape as an ambivalent interzone. This manifests as a blurring of boundaries not merely in terms of space, but of time. The events of the film's narrative appear to be taking place in the eponymous field, a quiet place adjacent to a noisy battlefield of the English Civil War. Subsequently,

however, we are led to understand that the field exists independently of the war and that, once inside it, past, present and future co-exist simultaneously. So, physically and temporally we are in a liminal space, and the narrative questions where, and when, the field is located. *A Field in England* integrates these concerns with its aesthetic identity as a prominent example of a contemporary British film that makes explicit its ambivalence towards notions of the pastoral. It can be seen as a cinematic inheritor of *Witchfinder General* and *Winstanley* in that it takes as its setting the English Civil War; in terms of style, it fuses the former film's kinetic violence with the latter's ideological debates. Henry K. Miller comments on the choice of the Civil War setting:

> *A Field in England* belongs to a long tradition in which the Civil War is seen as a moment of permanent schism in a way far transcending the immediate constitutional and religious questions over which the war was fought … By attempting to reconcile its cluster of contradictions, what *A Field in England* shows at its conclusion is a fragment of an impossible alternative future, an England which fell another way, the passage which we did not take. (2016: 44-5)

What is valuable here is Miller's description of Wheatley's film as a 'fragment of an impossible alternative future', a phrase which manages to crystallise the film's playful attitude to linearity and sense of temporal vagueness. This chapter builds upon this to claim that *A Field in England* shares and develops the earlier Civil War films' juxtaposition of lyricism and violence to establish, within a rustic setting that might once have been interpreted as pastoral, a tone that is instead anti-pastoral. This is betokened by the force of its protagonists' earthy language, gestures and opinions, which punctures the idyllic space and makes explicit an ambivalence towards notions of the pastoral. An integral part of this ambivalence is the cynicism with which the film views humanity: in Wheatley's narrative, everyone is in it for themselves. The same might be said of *Witchfinder General* but, in

contrast to the sobriety of Reeves' approach, Wheatley's tone is frequently one of jaundiced comedy. This is exemplified by the depictions of its characters and moments between them that qualify as grotesque. This returns us to Fisher's description of the grotesque, as discussed in Chapter One, as a form of the weird, where the fault-line between the grotesque and the weird is defined as 'frequent conjunctions of the laughable with that which is not laughable'. (2016: 38) Wheatley achieves this in *A Field in England* by consistently counterpointing the petty and mundane with the existential and cosmic. To compound this tone of uneasiness he chooses to compress the action into the weird space of the eponymous field, and in so doing explores strange ideas that belong as much to the twenty-first as to the seventeenth century.

Key to an understanding of the aesthetic project of *A Field in England* is the plasticity of its sense of time, which recalls Fisher's point that: 'cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity'. (2014: 9) This enables the film to use a historical period of flux, more than three centuries ago, to explore preoccupations with a contemporary era of comparable instability, framing questions about nationhood, insularity and the class system, using the narrow field as a central metaphor. Joel McKim attributes this plasticity of time, resulting in a sense of 'strange simultaneity', to the film's use of digital anachronisms:

> Wheatley's gradual insertion of digital techniques disrupts the film's illusion of historical integrity and helps produce a distinctly unsettling and intense aesthetic experience. The film's anachronisms escalate in parallel with the proliferation of supernatural elements within the narrative, yet it is precisely these creative or fantastic interventions into factual history that produce a visceral engagement with the period. (2016: 46-7)

McKim underlines that what the film offers is not authenticity but an 'illusion of historical integrity'. Yet, paradoxically, at the same time it is Wheatley's deployment of anachronisms

that enables such a 'visceral engagement with the period'. For McKim, the film's unsettling quality in terms of its use of space and time is an aspect of Wheatley's technical craftsmanship: 'the precise black-and-white tone developed in post-production helps invoke a complicated set of overlapping historical temporalities – the Civil War setting of the film viewed through the prism of a 1960s television aesthetic created via a contemporary digital technique.' (2016: 48) The idea of digital anachronisms is fascinating, but this thesis argues that what McKim sums up as the 'unsettling and intense aesthetic experience' (2016: 46) of viewing *A Field in England* derives from a complex range of sources, and is a result as much of story and character nuance as of digital techniques.

The film's narrative revolves around five characters in one location, and as such functions as a kind of male chamber piece; as one character mutters, 'what this party lacks is the civilising influence of women'. Three fugitive soldiers from Cromwell's army, Cutler (Ryan Pope), Jacob (Peter Ferdinando) and Friend (Richard Glover), and a civilian and apprentice astrologer, Whitehead (Reece Shearsmith), stray from the melee of battle into an apparently peaceful field. Here, through Cutler's wiles, they free an imprisoned necromancer, O'Neil (Michael Smiley), under whose power they fall and who forces them to search for treasure buried somewhere within the field. Cutler, Jacob and Friend die and finally it is Whitehead, O'Neil's former slave and dupe, who confronts and kills the antagonist O'Neil, before leaving the field, wearing the necromancer's cloak and accompanied by the apparently resurrected Jacob and Friend. One interpretation of this enigmatic denouement is that the whole narrative has been a fantasy enacted in Whitehead's imagination under the influence of magic mushrooms. It is also consistent with the film's treatment of time as possessing a strange simultaneity, that characters appear dead and alive in the same narrative.

Time in *A Field in England* is encompassed by a pressing sense that, countering the insularity of the field, a literal and metaphysical world lies beyond its confines. For example, O'Neil

the necromancer, wide-brimmed hat and cloak an echo of Matthew Hopkins' attire in *Witchfinder General* (Fig. 1), observes to the civilian Whitehead: 'this is your country, is it not? Although I've claimed a small corner, which I'm intent on raping a little. It's only fair I take something in return for my countrymen's trouble.'



Fig. 1

This reference to O'Neil's Irishness provides historical context, reminding us of Cromwell's notoriously brutal tactics in his conquest of Ireland, but it also informs the film's examination of the class system. Unlike working-class footsoldiers Cutler, Jacob and Friend, or middle-class alchemist's assistant Whitehead, O'Neil is nobility, one of the Irish earls in flight from his native country to Catholic France or Spain. He later states: 'we shall venture to continental Europe when the opportunity arises.' Placed as we are in a small field in provincial England, O'Neil's allusion to abroad feels, to Cutler, Jacob, Friend, Whitehead and us, exotic and threatening. The attitudes of the period are exemplified in Whitehead's words 'it does not surprise me that the Devil is an Irishman', but also feed into the film's foggy sense of there being an us and a them, that anything unknown and alien is menacing. By suggesting that a shadow is cast over the field by the implied spaces outside it, Wheatley implements a strategy to further disorient characters and viewers in terms of location and time. Alongside the carnage of Cromwell's Siege of Drogheda, an example of another contemporary conflict whose presence is left implicit outside the narrow world of the field is

the continental Thirty Years War. With his finery and air of authority, O'Neil possesses knowledge of this continental Europe. This is opposed to the other characters, who are islanders to be fobbed off with the repeated promise of an alehouse awaiting them at the other end of the field. Knowledge, which O'Neil possesses and to which Whitehead aspires, is power, and the power structure is reflected in the class divisions. The lowest, socially speaking, and most benign of the soldiers is Friend, who through the force of his ignorance channels the insularity of the field and implicitly of the nation. For example, Whitehead asks Friend in amazement, on discovering that he knows nothing of the stars or astrology: 'have you never looked up?' These twin motifs of home and abroad are symbolised by the elements: imagery relating to the soil, mushrooms and bodily functions signifies the earth and England, whereas the stars, planets and magic signify the air and the alien. In the final confrontation between O'Neil and Whitehead, the two elements collide and, although the Englishman wins, the nature of his victory is unclear, in that he leaves the field wearing the necromancer's hat and cloak.

This series of tensions in *A Field in England*, between the laughable and the not laughable, ignorance and knowledge, home and abroad, time present and time elsewhere, is augmented by the authentic atmosphere of black magic with which the film is infused. Whitehead's absent 'master' is referred to as an 'eminent alchemist, physician and astrologer'; among O'Neil's belongings is that tool of the occult, a scrying mirror, and Whitehead's fears that they will be 'blasted by an ill planet' are realised, possibly under the influence of hallucinogens, by his vision of an eclipse. By freeing O'Neil from his prison below the field, the men unleash magical forces that are equally, if not more, destructive than those of war. All that unites the Englishmen in their enslavement by, and later rebellion against, O'Neil is fraternity. In this respect, *A Field in England* shares both the moral darkness of *Witchfinder General* and the endorsement of humanity and democracy at the heart of *Winstanley*. This

duality is reflected in Wheatley's use of the word 'friend': on the one hand Cutler calls the corpses which he robs 'friend', and on the other it is the character Friend, kind, parochial, both dead and alive, who could be described as the soul of the film.

In a reversal of the ideology of *Winstanley, A Field in England* ends by favouring the individual's actions over those of the collective. Nonetheless the gesture it makes, towards comradeship in the face of an uncaring authority, is a sincere one. A strong factor that unites all three British films which take the same era as their setting is the resonance between time and politics. On the one hand, their choice of the specific historical period of the Civil War and the attendant 'lack of order in the land' confers on them Fisher's strange simultaneity, so that their events can unfold in the seventeenth century and yet possess contemporary relevance. On the other, the fluidity of the films' politics can embrace the utopian, the socialist and the libertarian. With regards to the role of social class in *A Field in England*, Wheatley's film closely follows the contours of Williams' argument that: 'the great problem of English rural history is the endless complication of intermediate classes: between the feudal lord and the serf; between the great landowner and the hired landless labourer.' (2016: 56)

This chapter has established that *A Field in England* functions as a political portrait of squabbling intermediate classes subjugated by an outsider-overlord. How then does it subvert pastoral tropes to emerge as an anti-pastoral? As Wheatley's fourth feature film, it represents a bold step forward aesthetically and in its use of nature it demonstrates a confidence in moving beyond text to pure imagery. Natural phenomena are foregrounded visually: insects, plants, shadows and light gazed at in stylised close-up to create a sense that the field is a harmonious, organic world. The result is that we are constantly reminded of the field's identity as a pastoral space. In set-pieces such as Whitehead's sinister emergence from his enslavement within O'Neil's tent, the eclipse of the sun (Fig. 2) and the climactic duel with

flintlock pistols, Wheatley's triangulation of image, sound design and music is so spectacularly managed as to suggest, through a combination of slow-motion action and manipulative arrangement of effects and chords on the sound spectrum, that we are all, characters and spectators, in the grip of powerful natural forces. Yet it is established, from the violence into which we are plunged at the film's opening, consisting of the explosions of the battlefield conflict and Whitehead's flight into the sanctuary of the field that will prove illusory, that this natural idyll will be corrupted by the arrival of men. So the film presents the components of a pastoral, but its project is to show how they are ruined by the timeless factors of human action, morality and psychology.

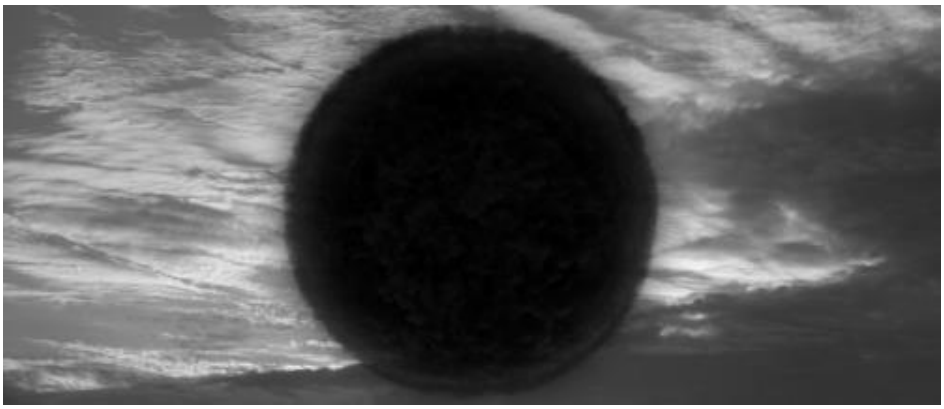


Fig. 2

What lends the location of the field further ambiguity is how the purity of this harmonious space is compromised because it is, arguably, already poisoned. Within it is buried, imprisoned by means of a wooden stake driven into the earth, the necromancer waiting for his chance at freedom, for which the arrival of Cutler, Friend, Jacob and Whitehead will be the catalyst. A clear biblical analogy presents itself, of the field as the Garden of Eden and O'Neil as the serpent in the Tree of Knowledge. If the setting of *A Field in England* can be read as a prelapsarian idyll, however, it is significant that in Wheatley's worldview no human, not even Friend who functions as a kind of holy fool, possesses any original innocence from which to fall. Instead, the juxtaposition of Wheatley's sensitivity to nature,

and the physical disharmony and moral dysfunction of the narrative that plays out within the apparently pastoral setting, creates a tone that subverts pastoral tropes and transitions into anti-pastoral. In the wider context of this thesis' consideration of the overlapping modes of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic within the use of landscape by twenty-first-century British cinema, *A Field in England* is a key film. This is because it is, on the one hand, mired in the pestilence in the ditch, to the extent that it can be said to epitomise it. On the other, to develop Williams' thesis, it offers a song of the land wherein camera, sound and music combine as instruments of poetry. In that its vision is not pastoral but anti-pastoral, it is also a true history of the English countryside.

The Multiple Memory of the Dead

It has been considered how *A Field in England* and its cinematic predecessors *Witchfinder General* and *Winstanley* embody a transition out of pastoral, by a consideration of the films' contrasting attitudes to notions of the pastoral mode. Before moving to a discussion of the subversion of the pastoral mode in Clio Barnard's films *The Selfish Giant* and *Dark River*, it will first be constructive to introduce three useful concepts to this thesis, of haunted landscapes, shadow-sites and landscape ghosts. These inform how the eerie synthesises with a variant of the pastoral, which I have identified as the anti-pastoral, to establish an aesthetic dynamic which lays the foundations for a British anti-landscape. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, films that choose the era of the English Civil War as their setting create an anti-pastoral dynamic by generating a tension between extremes of repose and action, and of lyricism and violence. In looking for a definition of the pastoral, this thesis has reflected on the centrality for Williams of the role of the past, and his insistence that we examine 'the recurrent myth of a happier and more natural past' (2016: 56). The Civil War films function partly as a corrective to the misremembrance of the brutality of the past. It was established in the previous chapter the emphasis placed by contemporary British filmmakers on avoiding

any falsification of history. In his analysis of landscapes and their ghosts, Martyn Hudson addresses the legacy of this past and suggests that the physical reality of human lives lost in historical conflicts manifests as social haunting. In this context, space and memory intersect to leave a deposit of 'haunted landscapes – historically sedimented and stratified by the multiple memory of the dead.' (2017: 17)

This idea of social haunting is relevant to a consideration of the treatment of landscape by the films under discussion, and will be developed in my discussion of the *Red Riding* Trilogy in Chapter Six. The haunted landscapes of which Hudson writes are recognisably those of *A Field in England* and its predecessor *Witchfinder General*. These are films wherein Williams' 'reflective pastoral tradition' (2016: 96) is supplanted by threatening spaces where the constant proximity of nature to death establishes a darker tone. In them, the spectacle of the cheapness of human life against a backdrop of conflict links to Hudson's 'multiple memory of the dead' and contributes to the development of the mode of anti-pastoral. One key way in which the films enact this idea, of the imprinting of memory onto landscape, is through their slowing down of time at moments of injury or death. Stearne in *Witchfinder General* and Jacob in *A Field in England* pass out or die after a passage of time that is lent a dream-like quality by the filmmakers' use of imagery and pace. It is a time during which, the filmmakers imply, the characters' wounded or dying states intensify their bond with the space they occupy, upon which spaces, now vacated, their lives subsequently leave an impression. In this intersection of human anguish, memory and landscape, the films endorse Hudson's suggestion that, layer by layer over time, deaths contribute to a multiple memory. In so doing they puncture the myth of a happier past, as Williams demands is necessary; they puncture the pastoral, and in so doing define themselves as anti-pastoral.

Ashley Pharaoh's *The Living and the Dead* (BBC, 2016) is a British supernatural horror television miniseries set in the Victorian era that concerns the psychogeographical recurrence

of eerie events on a rural Somerset farm. It affords an example of a contemporary screen fiction that takes as its subject matter the impingement, by unexplained phenomena such as revenants, of traumatic past events upon a narrative set in a fixed time-frame. As such it represents one of Hudson's haunted landscapes, peopled by a 'multiple memory of the dead.' Central to the series' narrative is the agricultural and industrial past of its rural Somerset setting, which manifests as the irruption into the contemporary time-frame of farming or mining tragedies that took place decades before. This effectively transforms a physical space into literally a haunted landscape. What enables such work to successfully merge elements of the eerie with the anti-pastoral is its grasp of what Fisher expresses as: 'how reverberant events in the psyche become revenants.' (2014: 18-19) This can be applied more prosaically to *The Living and the Dead*, and more poetically to *A Field in England*, of which film one reading is that its characters are all revenants. They are dead in battle before the film opens, and now encounter each other in a limbo offered by the eponymous field, engaged upon a search for an elusive alehouse on the far side that inevitably functions as a metaphor for death. An alternate, related reading is that the field exists in time present, the twenty-first century, and the film's events represent a haunting by characters and actions from the time of the English Civil War. As previously discussed, the elliptical handling of time in Wheatley's film allows for multiple interpretations. What is fundamental to its generation of the anti-pastoral is how it straddles the line between space and action, and between the landscape and reverberant events in the psyche. Both *The Living and the Dead* and *A Field in England* exemplify recent British screen fictions that reach towards being not a myth of a happier past, but a true history of the English countryside.

Closely linked to the above notion of events imprinting themselves on the land, and developing Hudson's idea of haunted landscapes, is Macfarlane's approach to reading a place through its identity as a shadow-site:

> Closely examined, the landscape revealed itself to be full of 'shadow-sites'. A shadow-site was the relic trace of a path, earthwork, post hole or ditch, hidden often in plain view but apparent only under certain circumstances – especially when the sun was low and bright, throwing its light at a slant and thereby lending revelatory shadows to the land. (2012: 48)

Macfarlane is applying this idea to the landscape of the British Isles, whereas this thesis develops it into the context the landscapes of contemporary British cinema. The key phrases are 'relic trace' and 'revelatory shadows' because they have a quality that combines the poetic with the graphic, in which respect Macfarlane might be describing the aesthetics of film as much as of geography. It has been discussed how characters pass like revenants through the landscape of *A Field in England*, but the cinematic landscapes of films with contemporary settings such as *Red Road, Tyrannosaur* and *The Selfish Giant* are equally full of shadow-sites. The latter three films take place in urban environments, Glasgow, Leeds and Bradford respectively, that are haunted by a sense of their pre-industrial histories. In them, the 'relic trace' may take the form of the incongruous presence of nature in the city that connotes wildness and hints at a forgotten tribal memory of freedom. These relic traces are typified by the foxes of *Red Road*, the dogs of *Tyrannosaur* and the horses of *The Selfish Giant* (Fig. 3), or they may take the form of a psychological haunting, returning us to Fisher's 'reverberant events in the psyche'. In *Red Road* Jackie endlessly scans via CCTV camera the streets which bear the relic trace of her husband and daughter, for whose death she now seeks retribution. In *Tyrannosaur* the pavements and parks that Joseph pounds in a state of inarticulate rage are places marked by the absence of his dead wife, and of his former life as her husband and carer. In *The Selfish Giant* the relic trace connects past with future, as the image of wild horses grazing in fields reminds us of a lost rurality, but the fact that they do so beneath huge pylons foreshadows the terrible fate that awaits one of the protagonists. In each

case, the filmmakers read physical and psychological landscapes in their work as shadow-sites, and by emphasising this in cinematic terms they are also 'lending revelatory shadows to the land'. What the shadows reveal is history: the multiple memory of the dead.



Fig. 3

Returning to Williams' 'question of pastoral' with which the previous chapter opened, it has been established that these films present landscapes to which the term pastoral can no longer be applied, and for which only a new mode, which this thesis calls the anti-pastoral, can be adequate. Two contemporary-set films that boldly map this new landscape, representative of the British anti-landscape in their fusion of concepts of eerie and anti-pastoral, are *The Selfish Giant* and *Dark River*. David Forrest acknowledges the correlation of space and narrative in Barnard's work:

> … space in Barnard's films is thus never presented as fixed or static but is instead revealed to be formed of multiple, often conflicting narratives … (through) the post-industrial vistas of *The Selfish Giant* that reveal the corrosive presence of the past, and the precarious and exploited internal and external landscapes of *Dark River,* the lived environment is both disturbingly authentic and presented as mutable and lyrically charged … simultaneously marrying the familiar with the lyrical and in the process enabling a critical engagement with the everyday. (2020: 167)

Forrest uses oppositions, such as the post-industrial present versus the 'corrosive presence' of the past, and internal versus external landscapes, to underline the versatility and suppleness of Barnard's use of space. The inclusion of time links to Macfarlane's idea of shadow-sites, while the use of adjectives such as 'authentic', 'mutable', 'familiar' and 'lyrical' captures the sophistication of Barnard's approach. Arguably the films go beyond this, and deliberately dispense with notions of the picturesque in a bravura way. So *The Selfish Giant* sets about not merely puncturing, but clinically deconstructing outmoded notions of the pastoral.

Set in a liminal zone, the fault-line of the post-industrial edgelands between urban Bradford and rural West Yorkshire, the film's opening tableau shows, against a starlit night sky, a row of pylons towering over horses in a field. An awareness is immediately enabled of the tension between pastoral and anti-pastoral, organic and human-made, life and death. Hockenhull points to the importance of this establishment of the film's style:

> … its poetic qualities are foregrounded through pictorial imagery at the outset. Opening shots show a herd of horses grazing on the skyline; filmed in silhouette the animals are set against a dark sky, and the typography of the title is revealed letter by letter, mobilising an ethereal effect for the spectator. (2017: 124)

The effectiveness of Barnard's style lies in the way its sure poetic touches, such as the typography of the title, or the opening tableau's interlinking of an image system of stars, animals and children, are constantly counterpointed with bleaker truths of economic devastation. These truths compel adults such as scrap dealer Kitten (Sean Gilder) to exploit children to ensure financial survival, which escalates to a conclusion that is both painful and plausible. Of the two boys drawn into Kitten's orbit, Arbor (Conner Chapman) and Swifty (Shaun Thomas), the latter pays with his life when, in their search for copper to sell, he is accidentally electrocuted by a high voltage wire. The film draws its power from Barnard's implication that the pastoral is, somehow, ultimately fatal. To both child and horse, which are

symbols of dutifulness, naturalness and innocence, the locus of the field, once a pre-industrial and pastoral space, now offers not sanctuary but death. By situating the death of innocents in what was, once upon a time, a place of idyll, she frames the tragedy as an act of betrayal by a post-industrial society of its children. The lethal live cable lying in wait beneath the pylons for Swifty is the pestilence in the ditch made real. The sense of landscape in *The Selfish Giant*, as in the other films under discussion, is brooding and full of latent violence, but Barnard takes the bold step to make this not just implicit, but explicit. She achieves this by situating the cable within the landscape itself, so it is arguably part of it, and renders the landscape murderous. The persistent sense that there is a danger within landscape, a pestilence in the ditch, is articulated by the live wire. It echoes the necromancer imprisoned and awaiting the arrival of the soldiers in *A Field in England*, and can be traced back to the serpent in the Garden of Eden. In *The Selfish Giant*, a pastoral existence comes at a high price, and its landscape contains a dark secret, the knowledge of which is terminal.

On the subject of the relationship between time and place in *The Selfish Giant*, Forrest makes a persuasive point:

> …the sustained nature of poetic landscape shots is seen as evoking the notion of space as lived and experienced rather than as static and pictorial. In this case, Barnard invites contemplation of the landscapes' multiple temporalities – their yoking together of past, present and future tenses – to enable her lyrical examination of the post-industrial North and its exploitation by capital. The poetic placement of the shots asserts their multifaceted function within the film, and the ubiquitous nature of the images – familiar as they are across the landscapes of Britain – forces reflection on the lived experiences of our own environments, and their narrative construction. (2020: 184)

The choice of the words ‘multiple’ and ‘multifaceted’ reflects the diversity and fluidity of Barnard’s aesthetic approach. The key point which Forrest makes is that Barnard invites us to think about ‘the landscapes’ multiple temporalities’. Building upon this, this chapter suggests that the ‘yoking together’ of past, present and future mirrors the relationship between time and place in what is superficially a very different film, *A Field in England*. Forrest reinforces the importance of the bond in Barnard’s film between space and history:

> the heavy emphasis on the edgeland compositions of the cooling towers, pylons and animals works similarly to foster an image-led engagement with the politics of the landscape, one which draws together multiple intersecting narratives of past, present and future, of town and country. (2020: 188-9)

Forrest articulates that Barnard’s achievement in *The Selfish Giant* is to ask us to engage with the ‘politics of the landscape’ and to draw together ‘multiple intersecting narratives’ by means of the image. This thesis argues that Barnard does this moreover in the service of a contemporary morality tale, bringing together political concerns and folkloric storytelling with finesse.

The idea has already been introduced of the idea of shadow-sites in the context of the films under discussion. Macfarlane makes the further observation: ‘Landscape ghosts that had lain unseen for millennia suddenly reappeared.’ (2012: 48-9) Applying this notion of landscape ghosts to the films in this study, the importance can be discerned within them not just of history, but specifically of social changes enacted upon their landscapes. So, as much as the shadow-site mapped by *The Selfish Giant* can be identified as a landscape ghost of the vacuum left by industry, filled now by parasites like Kitten and his band of underaged scavengers, the true nature of its screen spaces is dictated by an absence at its heart: money. This returns us to Forrest’s analysis of the film as representing a ‘lyrical examination of the post-industrial North and its exploitation by capital.’ (2020: 184) The world depicted in *The*

Selfish Giant is impoverished, marginalised and finally undemocratic. Barnard's film amounts to a cry of outrage at this state of affairs, and in this its landscape aligns with that described by Fisher: 'the English landscape is the site of numerous struggles between the forces of power and privilege and those who sought to resist them.' (2014: 225) Yet, unlike the Civil War films previously discussed, in *The Selfish Giant* these forces of power and privilege are invisible. Instead, our point of view is entirely that of the resisters, those who, socially speaking, constitute the underclass, desperate for money and consequently hungry. Their infighting and mutual exploitation are all the more shocking because their frustration ought to be directed at those responsible, the forces of power and privilege above them, and not at each other. In taking as its setting a post-industrial space, Barnard's film is a lament for a lost community and as such it belongs in the same tradition as the poetry of which Williams speaks. It qualifies as a song of the land, but the land of which it sings is perhaps not one we wish to recognise.

So, the new landscape mapped and revealed in *A Field in England* and *The Selfish Giant* is a land of the dead, home equally to concepts of the eerie and to concepts of the pastoral. As articulated by the idea of shadow-sites, the films offer a sense that this landscape is not so new, that in fact it has always been there. However, to return to Williams, an idealisation has served to cover and evade 'the actual and bitter contradictions of the time' (2016: 63). In order to fulfil the filmmakers' intention that their films qualify as true histories, they must grapple with these bitter contradictions, a consequence of which is that they subvert or take a stance against the pastoral, or both. In their films, Wheatley and Barnard take diverse approaches to these contradictions but in their search for authenticity, in order to qualify as true histories, they find common ground. Their shared journey takes them through contemplation and rejection of the pastoral, to the embrace of the anti-pastoral.

The Refusal of the Pastoral

In this chapter it has been demonstrated how films such as *A Field in England* and *The Selfish Giant* offer up alternative visions of the British landscape by employing as a strategy what Hutchings calls a 'suppression of the picturesque and the touristic' (2004: 27). The development of this move away from the picturesque is observed by Hockenhull who asserts that it is the harsh realities of rural life that carry both aesthetic and moral significance, and not their picturesque misrepresentation. Her identification of space as not only dirty, but actively dangerous, serves to emphatically distance us from notions of the pastoral. Clio Barnard's *Dark River* is a British film of the new century that concerns itself with the harsh realities of rural life, and affords a powerful example of a contemporary-set narrative which grapples with and dismantles notions of the picturesque with some finality. Regarding the idealisation of the land, Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield remind us that:

> … another key element of the rural landscape is its emotive, nostalgic power as an idealised space and community – the land imagined or remembered as a dream and that finds its most visceral evocation through the imagery of earth and sand and flesh and bone. (2006: 6-7)

There is a resonance between Fowler and Helfield's ideas and Barnard's vision in *Dark River*. It is a film that confronts the 'emotive, nostalgic power' of the rural landscape while not shying away from its physical reality, a reality that reveals our sense of the land to have been a dream. As with *The Selfish Giant*, Barnard evokes her chosen terrain, the land, viscerally and once more fosters what Forrest calls an 'image-led engagement' with landscape and its history.

Like its predecessor *The Selfish Giant*, *Dark River* is set in the filmmaker's native West Yorkshire, but its edgelands locale is rural instead of urban. It chronicles the return after fifteen years' absence of Alice (Ruth Wilson) to the farm where she grew up, and which is

now being run by her estranged brother Joe (Mark Stanley). The catalyst for Alice's return is the death of her father (Sean Bean), which means she can inherit the tenancy of the farm, to the bitter consternation of her brother who has acted as tenant farmer in his sister's absence. *Dark River* is more elliptical than *The Selfish Giant* but is still possessed of the earlier film's strengths, namely an elegant control of plot and an uneasy atmosphere of characters at the mercy of fate. However, while it is less direct, it is possibly even more multi-layered than Barnard's previous film, in that as its narrative develops it shifts aesthetic shape. In this way, what begins as a kind of farm procedural combined with a character study takes on darker hues. Once flashbacks to the siblings' father establish his sexual abuse of Alice and her consequent flight from home, now the film becomes a highly charged two-hander about the legacy of the past upon both individuals and place. It is a densely haunted landscape: as in *The Selfish Giant*, location in *Dark River* is full of shadow-sites. These range from the farm interiors with their secret history of violence to the exteriors such as the outhouse where Alice chooses to stay in a sleeping-bag. She is ready to leave at a moment's notice, because to come any closer to the family farm, in terms of shelter and comfort, would be to commit to a return to a space of literal and psychic danger. Alice is the returning, damaged protagonist, a transient locating herself in a liminal space which offers a base from which she can carry out sorties into a past life. The similarities are striking with the avenging paratrooper Richard in *Dead Man's Shoes*. In their shared disquietude within landscapes from which they are alienated, Alice and Richard are spiritual siblings.



Dark River: the returning, damaged protagonist

It is in *Dark River*'s treatment of place, however, that it shape-shifts to find perhaps its true aesthetic identity. It has been established that the space of the farm and its environs constitutes for sister and brother a haunted landscape, so that the backstory unfolding in flashback comes to resemble a dark updating of a fairytale about an ogre-like father and his two children. In counterpoint to these gothic touches, Barnard presents the physical world of landscape, farm and outbuildings with restraint, showing rusting machinery, vulnerable livestock and dilapidated interiors with a realistic eye. The potential for a pastoral is there, but Barnard refuses it. Instead we are left in no doubt that father and son have allowed this land run to seed and hence Alice's homecoming must be both barren and confrontational. Furthermore, if we apply the notion of landscape ghosts, as previously discussed, to *Dark River*, we can clearly discern the importance within the film's narrative of social changes enacted upon its landscape. It is a film full of landscape ghosts, where the legacy of these social changes is shown to be a contemporary issue, not just for Alice and Joe but for other farmers. These, like Joe, may be tempted or bullied into accepting a buyout for £100,000 from a landowner for whom the place holds no emotional ties but rather is simply unprofitable. Forrest makes the link between domestic and societal abuse:

> an explicit and uncomfortable connection is made between Alice's traumatic return to the farm as site of childhood abuse and the farm itself as a symbol of the economic precariousness and exploitation that afflicts the rural working classes. (2020: 191)

This chapter develops this point to argue that, just as the narrative of *The Selfish Giant* offers a window upon the economic exploitation of the post-industrial North, so *Dark River* functions as a prism through which to view the real rural landscape, not an idealised version from imagination or memory. In this, *Dark River* qualifies as a lament, a song of the land, but one quite distinct from *The Selfish Giant*. This is borne out by a brief comparison of the two films' cinematographic palettes: in the earlier film, cinematographer Mike Eley gives the post-industrial landscape of the Bradford edgelands a wintry, powdery look, their desaturated colours suggestive of a post-apocalyptic space and redolent of a land of the dead. Whereas in *Dark River* cinematographer Adriano Goldman gives a golden, pastoral glow to the rural Yorkshire landscape and a green, organic feel to the shadowy woods through which at the climax, cradling a shotgun, Alice runs down towards the eponymous river where a killing will take place. This juxtaposition of summery countryside with violent, disturbing content strengthens the film's claim to be an anti-pastoral *par excellence*.

A brief consideration of a sequence, roughly fifteen minutes before the end of *Dark River*, illustrates its careful balance of palette and framing, action and tone in relation to ideas of the anti-pastoral. As rain begins to pelt down, a dog attacks the sheep, eviscerating one. In a medium shot, Alice cocks her shotgun, followed by a wide shot of her moving right to left through the green woods, in pursuit of the dog. The leaves in the foreground are out of focus, and Alice's face is accentuated at the back of frame, lending it the mythic aspect of a hunter within nature. The rain and the lush greenery confer a jungle-like quality upon the location. Shots of her pursuit are intercut with staccato flashbacks to childhood moments with her father (Bean). A reverse wide shot shows, moving left to right as they pursue Alice, her

brother Joe (Stanley) and a male neighbour. Their flashlight shines in her eyes, and the next shot shows her point of view: a vision of her father, looming behind the flare of the flashlight. In a close-up, looking camera left, she shoots. There is silence, then the sound of the falling rain returns, and it's revealed she has accidentally shot the neighbour. A short series of single close-ups show brother and sister in the river at dusk, then Joe takes the shotgun from her and runs into the thick woods. A canted angle close-up of Alice's face is followed by a medium wide shot of her by a waterfall, as she floats the dead body towards it, then pushes the corpse underwater. The effect is of a parody of a baptism, and the introduction of death, instead of life, turns the pastoral into its opposite, the anti-pastoral.

In this sequence, physically and psychologically, landscape becomes shadow-site. The revelatory shadows that Barnard lends to the land are implications that, having spent half her life trying to leave it behind, Alice is inseparable from this . place. Forrest underlines the centrality of landscape to the effectiveness of Barnard's work:

> they (the films) are continually grounded by an authentic sense of place. This approach to location exerts heightened, poetic emphasis upon the sensory experience of the environment, on its symbolic significance in relation to questions of structural and identity politics, and as a mechanism to explore the inner states of her characters. (2020: 193)

This can be related more widely to the discussion in this thesis of the use of landscape in contemporary British cinema in that the films' 'authentic sense of place' unites poetic, sensory, symbolic and political elements in service of a narrative. As illustrations of this, the final minutes of *The Selfish Giant* hint at a reconciliation between Arbor and his mother, but this reconciliation is wordless and implicit. Or at the end of *Dark River*, Alice sits with Joe in the visitors' room of the prison where he is incarcerated, having turned himself in for the

murder that she committed. The silence between them offers hope when words and actions have been shown to be inadequate. The tone, choice of location and lack of dialogue of the end of *Dark River* mirror the concluding scene between Joseph and Hannah in *Tyrannosaur*, which is similarly a cathartic narrative that takes as its theme the legacy of past sins. Thus, *Dark River* has worked towards its logical conclusion by fusing elements of the eerie and the pastoral to create a unifying aesthetic dynamic, the anti-pastoral. This in turn deconstructs notions of the pastoral to the extent that it asserts, by implication, that the picturesque must be stripped away for the truth to be revealed and examined. This results in an interrogation, that takes the form of wordless communication between individuals. Another theme of *Dark River* is inheritance, both for Alice and Joe and for the wider farming community. In suggesting that both the financial burden of the family farm and the emotional legacy of the father's actions are ultimately too painful for words, the film posits that, finally, our ideas of landscape itself are inherited. Now, however, like received ideas of the pastoral, they are redundant.

A Dispossession

It has been shown how the anti-pastoral spaces of a film such as *Dark River* identify as dangerous, both physically and psychically, to inhabit, in that they appear closer to nature and further away from civilisation. This paradoxically takes us closer to Barnard's goal of presenting a true history of the English countryside, and aligns with the aesthetic imperative of the films under discussion, which is not to idealise. In concluding this chapter on the pastoral, it will be instructive to reflect briefly on how contemporary British cinema upholds and renews significant aspects of the literary pastoral tradition of which Williams writes, in particular the question of pastoral in poetry. As discussed, Williams' insistence that we do not idealise the past speaks directly to the anti-pastoral project of films such as *A Field in England, The Selfish Giant* and *Dark River*. With regards to the films' goal to be considered

as true histories, this project is the aim to cover and evade no longer, but instead to actively engage with what Williams calls the ‘bitter contradictions of the time’ (2016: 63). Precisely what time, as the films demonstrate, may vary across four centuries, but the contradictions remain the same.

The previous chapter and this onehave reflected how the contemporary British films under discussion share a conflicted relationship with the past. The unresolved nature of this attitude can be ascribed, in broad terms, to its combination of two elements: the euphoria inspired by the physical beauty of some views of nature, and the passionate conviction of the primacy of moral values inspired by social inequality. Relating to this notion of views of nature, John Lucas suggests in his essay about the relationship of the poets Wordsworth and Clare to the picturesque, that it is in their ambivalence towards the mode of the picturesque that they offer ‘something that approaches a tragic vision of the changes that occur within so-called ‘picturesque’ landscapes’. (1988: 83) These are the same changes which Williams describes as ‘the transition from reflection to retrospect’ (2016: 102). Integral to the aesthetic manifesto of the British films under discussion is this same tragic vision of changes within landscape, a vision underpinned by a sense of loss, and representing the development of a literary pastoral tradition into a cinematic one.

John Clare was the poet of rural change, who saw all about him the impact of the enclosures, but his poetry was as much concerned with the psychological damage wrought by enclosure. His 1835 poem ‘The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters’ is particularly useful to capture the concept and tradition of pastoral, because it is self-evidently an elegy for a changing rural landscape: ‘The bawks and eddings are no more/ The pastures too are gone,/ The greens, the meadows and the moors/ Are all cut up and done;/ There’s scarce a greensward spot remains/ And scarce a single tree;/ All naked are thy native plains/ And yet they’re dear to thee.’ (2007: 9) The poem’s bittersweet tone stems from a combination of affection for the land, as

shown in the choice of dialect words such as ‘bawks’ and ‘eddings’, and anger at its destruction, as evidenced by the terse repetition of the monosyllable ‘scarce’. The poem is not reflective, in a more traditional pastoral sense, but retrospective, in that it serves as a backward glance at something lost or in the process of being lost. A consideration of the work of, for example, contemporary British filmmakers such as Arnold and Considine shows that these are artists with a similar inclination to give a central place in their aesthetic to this sense of transition. *Red Road, Fish Tank* and *Tyrannosaur* address deeply felt concerns regarding alienation from place through the use of incongruous, poignant irruptions of natural phenomena such as animals, birds and the elements into what otherwise manifests as a land of the dead. In adopting the same ambivalence towards the idea of the picturesque as a literary predecessor such as Clare, Arnold, Considine and their peers are the cinematic heirs to the nature poets of two centuries earlier, whose legacy is most evident in the filmmakers’ ambivalence towards place.

What unites the treatment of place in the films under discussion is a sense of desertion. This is partly the eerie, whose atmosphere can be conjured by there being an absence where there should be a presence. However, there is also a political dimension to the absence at the heart of these films. Who or what has forsaken these spaces? Nick Groom points to the historical legacy upon the British landscape of:

> a landslide of Enclosure Acts, which physically removed the unimproved common people from the homesteads, hamlets and villages that had supported them for centuries. Agricultural labourers and their communities were made to disappear as England was reconfigured. (2013: 221)

More than two centuries after the enclosures, it is notable that the point of view inhabited by the films of Arnold, Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley is that of these same

'unimproved common people' of whom Groom speaks. In the films these people take the form of characters who, metaphorically, are dispossessed of their reconfigured country.

Significantly, both Williams and Groom point to the centrality of Oliver Goldsmith's 1770 poem of social commentary, 'The Deserted Village'. Groom describes how Goldsmith:

> portrays an eerily abandoned village: a village become extinct by an unholy union of Enclosure and landscape gardening … The poem mixes local remembrance with a melancholy sense of loss through social predation – the crumbling village now stands as a terrible *memento mori* for modern farming practices, which themselves go hand in hand with the indulgences of the pastoral. (2013: 228)

Groom's account of the areas addressed in Goldsmith's poem aligns absolutely with those which Barnard explores in *Dark River*. In the film, Alice returns to a farming community similarly 'become extinct'. The narrative brims with the same 'melancholy sense of loss through social predation', manifested here by Joe's bitter resentment of the wider societal reasons for the farm's failure, as well as by his own responsibility for them. Goldsmith's poem describes a haunted landscape, which finds a perfect parallel in *Dark River*. Central to both, although separated by centuries, is the acknowledgment of the death of modern farming practices and that we must recognise the pastoral as an indulgence. Of Goldsmith's poem, Williams notes: 'What is strangest in the poem is its combination of protest and nostalgia, and the way these emotions are related, consciously and unconsciously, to the practice of poetry.' (2016: 108-9)

What Williams applies to a literary question of pastoral can be developed to point to how it is echoed in the aesthetic of contemporary British films. They are marked by the same combination of protest and nostalgia, and examine an emotional response through the mode of poetry, using not words but imagery.

Williams comments further on ‘The Deserted Village’: ‘the social forces which are dispossessing the village are seen as simultaneously dispossessing poetry.’ (2016: 110) *The Selfish Giant* and *Dark River* present active interpretations of this in that, in these films, the dispossession of the land equates to the taking away of a voice in which to speak about it. The paradox of this dispossession is that on one level the films yearn to indulge the pastoral, but on another they know that to do so would be false. Consequently, a way to resist this dispossession is through the anti-pastoral. This is typified by Swifty’s Traveller community of road-racers in *The Selfish Giant*, where an imported, inherited rural tradition of racing with horses and carts continues on the modern streets of Bradford (Fig. 4). It does not conform to traditional notions of the picturesque but, in its combination of skill, beauty of kinetic movement and relic trace of a bygone pastoral tradition, it makes a poetic statement. The road-racers can be viewed, perhaps, as descendants of the community of Goldsmith’s village. According to Groom: ‘The village’s inhabitants have fled … a countryside unperturbed by the inconvenience of the rural classes … They have been painted out of this landscape: ‘The country blooms – a garden, and a grave.’’ (2013: 229)



Fig. 4

Goldsmith’s phrase contrasting garden/grave crystallises the duality that, in contemporary films, manifests as anti-pastoral. The inhabitants of ‘The Deserted Village’ from the time of

the enclosures have been painted out of a pastoral landscape for reasons of idealisation, and have fled to the modern cities and edgelands of contemporary British films such as *Dead Man's Shoes, Fish Tank, Tyrannosaur* and *The Selfish Giant*. This results in these films' overarching sense of desertion and dispossession. It links in one direction to retrospect. In another, as we shall see in the next chapter, it points to questions of heritage.

Eerie-Pastoral-**Heritage**-Epic

CHAPTER FOUR

HERITAGE (I): THE REVOLT AGAINST HERITAGE



Nostalgia in the UK

So far, this thesis has used the concepts of the eerie and the pastoral to investigate the landscapes of contemporary British cinema, and their relation to earlier cinematic and literary traditions. Any conclusions regarding the screenworks' intentions on a political level have been by inference only. With regard to this, the eerieness of space in *Kill List* and *Catch Me Daddy*, or the anti-pastoral stance of *A Field in England* and *Dark River*, influence a reading of the films as much towards the aesthetic as towards the political. At the same time, if we accept that the films offer an embodiment of Fisher's 'apocalyptic lyricism' (2014: 80) and an insistence that we look upon the countryside with a fiercely unsentimental gaze, there is an argument for a political reading of them so that, taken as a whole and based on their depiction of onscreen space as recognisably a land of the dead, they function as a commentary on contemporary British society.

This chapter will use the concept of heritage to investigate these landscapes, and it is appropriate at the outset to acknowledge the explicitly political nuances which the area of heritage brings with it. As discussed in the Introduction, the subject matter of pioneering work on British heritage cinema by scholars such as Barr, Higson and Hill is inseparable from its historical context of 1980s Britain under Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister. So the analysis of the films in this study, which span the first two decades of this century from Meadows' *Dead Man's Shoes* in 2004 to Barnard's *Dark River* in 2017, will demonstrate that what brings together this work and that of previous scholars is a consideration of the broader cultural landscape and issues of heritage.

In beginning this chapter, therefore, before moving to an analysis of *Wuthering Heights* it will be useful in historical, political and aesthetic terms to establish key traits of heritage and to approach a working definition of what a heritage film is.

For many, the first response is that the phrase connotes a costume drama set in a historical period removed from our own. According to Higson: 'One of the central pleasures of the heritage film is the artful and spectacular projection of an elite, conservative vision of the national past.' (1996: 233) Higson underlines, by a triangulation of the historical, the political and the aesthetic, both the primacy and at the same time the complexity of the heritage film within the debate surrounding national cinema, and suggests that an interlinking of craft, showmanship and reception defines our relationship with the heritage film. However, I would suggest that the key word is 'projection', because of its implication that the films involve a level of fantasising, both on the part of the filmmakers and of ourselves. The films upon which Higson's study principally focuses are the three literary adaptations from the producer-director team Merchant-Ivory, *A Room With a View* (1986), *Howards End* (1992) and *The Remains of the Day* (1993). These are screenworks which stand up to an interpretation of them as political propaganda of the Thatcher-Major years, but whose 'elite, conservative vision of a national past' is also, it should be remembered, also commensurate with the source material from which they are adapted. Two decades after Higson's study, his definition of what constitutes a heritage film may still be applied, with fruitful results, to recent commercial British cinema releases. For example, films such as *Their Finest* (Lone Scherfig, 2016), *Darkest Hour* (Joe Wright, 2017), *Goodbye Christopher Robin* (Simon Curtis, 2017) and *Christopher Robin* (Marc Forster, 2018) all take as their settings the English eras of WWI, the Blitz or immediate post-WWII, and in so doing show themselves to be preoccupied with our national past. Beyond this, these recent narratives' examinations of strength of character against the backdrop of the worlds of literature (A.A.Milne and *Winnie the Pooh* in the Christopher Robin films), cinema (a fictionalised Ealing Studios in *Their Finest*) and politics (Winston Churchill in *Darkest Hour*) can be read as an idealisation of British history. Developing this point, the films function as exercises in nostalgia.

If this is the case, then nostalgia for what exactly? In choosing, as these period films do, to identify the virtues of community spirit and personal courage not with twenty-first-century Britain but with its recent past, these films operate as self-reflexive, sentimental fantasies that look backwards rather than forwards and consequently can be acknowledged as a contemporary continuation of a 'projection of an elite, conservative vision of the national past' (1996: 233). The following definition of nostalgia, written by Higson more than twenty years ago, also applies to the above-mentioned quartet of contemporary British films:

> Nostalgia is always in effect a critique of the present, which is seen as lacking something desirable out of reach in the past. Nostalgia … can also be used to comment on the inadequacies of the present from a more radical perspective. (1996: 238)

In keeping with these thoughts on nostalgia, the above-mentioned four films offer a commentary on the inadequacies of the present. One reading that emerges, perhaps a little too easily, is that in this instance the 'more radical perspective' refers to an anti-European, pro-Brexit stance. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that during the same time period as these four films which, as discussed, conform to Higson's idea of heritage films as projections of our past, four other British films were released that appear to project the opposite vision: *The Levelling* (Hope Dickson Leach, 2016), *Lady Macbeth* (William Oldroyd, 2016), *God's Own Country* (Francis Lee, 2017) and *Dark River* (2017). Made with lower budgets and aimed less at international markets, this alternative quartet of contemporary films is united by its lack of nostalgia for and indeed the absence of any mythologising of the national past. Three out of four of the films are set in a contemporary rural England marked by the harsh economic realities biting into everyday working lives in the agricultural community, while *Lady Macbeth* is a romance set in 1865 and so, being a period costume drama, conforms superficially to the Merchant-Ivory model of what constitutes a heritage film. Nonetheless,

Lady Macbeth foregrounds its principal concerns as being with the English landscape and with human psychology within this space, as opposed to offering merely pictorial pleasures. In this respect, it resembles a British film which will be analysed in depth in this chapter, *Wuthering Heights*.

In the same way as the previous chapter identified a stance among the contemporary British films under discussion that can be described as anti-pastoral, this chapter will look at why, and how, these films' attitude to notions of heritage appears to actively reject nostalgia and become one of anti-nostalgia. Furthermore, it will look at how in adopting this attitude the films challenge our assumptions of what a heritage film is, to the extent that they constitute a revolt against heritage. This chapter will discuss this idea of a revolt, based around the understanding of a heritage film as meaning a costume drama, with particular attention to *Wuthering Heights.* The study of the film is divided into three sections: the first , Unquiet Earth, considers Arnold's successful hybridisation of genres such as costume drama and documentary. The second section, A Space Without Boundaries, builds on these findings and argues that a porousness of boundaries is integral to the film's sense of landscape. The third section, Dead Nature, looks at Arnold's hybridisation of the genre of ghost story.

Then the next chapter, centring upon an analysis of *Sightseers,* will explore the idea that the heritage which the films subvert is also that of the social realist tradition. A reflection upon this tradition is relevant because, whilst it is clearly of central interest that the contemporary British films under discussion depart from traditions of British social realism in film, it is equally important to acknowledge that Arnold's, Barnard's, Considine's, Meadows' and Wheatley's work emerges from that tradition. Together, *Wuthering Heights* and *Sightseers* have been chosen to discuss in relation to ideas of heritage cinema, because of their provocative aesthetic and generic hybridity. Pairing *Wuthering Heights* with *Sightseers* in these chapters on heritage cinema is apposite, because both screenworks constitute a revolt

against heritage, while their different aesthetic approaches, so starkly contrasting on the surface, complement each other. Returning to Hutchings' exhortation that we look at what lies 'Beneath the heritage landscape' (2004), these chapters will also develop the argument that, in their rejection of labels with which they are impatient, such as costume drama or social realism, the films make claims to constitute an alternative heritage cinema.The revolt against heritage also functions as a response to the nostalgia debate, between films such as *Darkest Hour* on the one hand and *Wuthering Heights* on the other.

Redefining Heritage Cinema

In the opening essay of *All Our Yesterdays*, his edited collection looking back over ninety years of British cinema, Charles Barr emphasises the significance to British film culture of WWII, acknowledging how: 'by common consent, British cinema came into its ownin World War Two …. It is impossible to exaggerate the centrality of this period to any reading of British film history, from whatever critical perspective.' (1986: 10-11) This is a point further developed by James Chapman in his discussion in the same collection of heritage, spectacle and propaganda in British cinema where, using a case study of Olivier's *Henry V* (1944), he argues for how that film 'perfectly exemplifies the operation of British film propaganda: the representation of the nation at war arising from a consensus between cinema and state.' (2000: 204) Chapman's thinking about the relationship between cinema and state connects with the attempt in this thesis to define a certain tendency in contemporary British cinema, and how that tendency is manifested through the films' use of landscape. This chapter and the next on heritage are an attempt to address the apparent rejection, aesthetically speaking, by contemporary British films of the appearance of forming part of any consensus between cinema and state, such as that which existed in the period about which Barr and Chapman write. If we agree that the above-mentioned films made or set during WWII, including *Henry V* and *Darkest Hour*, conform to Chapman's notion of British film propaganda, then it is

important to note that the films with which this study is principally concerned, such as *Dead Man's Shoes* and *The Selfish Giant*, embody the opposite stance. They are what, in terms of a national cinema, might be described as both anti-consensus and anti-propaganda. Unlike the patriotic, optimistic visions of the WWII films wherein different strata of society unite under a charismatic leader, the contemporary British films in this study portray individuals at the bottom of the social scale, in post-industrial communities marked by disunity and marginalisation from what could be termed functional, mainstream society. This resistance of certain contemporary British films to the idea of belonging to a conventional reading of British film history can be construed as a spirit of rebellion. The result is that, ultimately, the films enact a revolt against heritage. It is in the light of this highly ambivalent attitude to the notion of heritage that we need to consider their relationship to the term, and indeed whether the films might qualify as a different kind of heritage cinema.

While this thesis acknowledges the value of the work of distinguished scholars, as previously discussed, such as Barr, Higson and Hill, and their contribution to the heritage cinema debate, it must at the same time update the discussion to the time of writing, two decades into the new century. More than seventy years have passed since the period to which Barr refers, and while five of the films so far analysed in this thesis concern themselves with wars, they are wars which date from a different period than that to which Barr gives centrality. These are namely the English Civil War in *Witchfinder General, Winstanley* and *A Field in England*, and the recent Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts in *Dead Man's Shoes* and *Kill List*. Except in the case of the above-mentioned recent British films including *Darkest Hour* and *Their Finest*, which as discussed serve a cultural purpose both propagandist and nostalgic, this thesis contends that the centrality of WWII has receded. Instead it may be that, in years to come, the current period at the start of the twenty-first century will be seen by film scholars as central to any reading of British film history. *Contra* Barr, any future revisitation of the

British heritage debate must involve an engagement with the idea that an aid to our understanding of contemporary British film is the thought that in fact *no* historical period is central to our reading of it. Barr uses the metaphors of amnesia and schizophrenia to describe our collective attitude to British film history, and in so doing asks how truthful our response to our own film culture is. His question in turn anticipates what this thesis shows to be the very ambivalence and awkwardness displayed by contemporary British films towards their country. Subtitled '90 Years of British Cinema', Barr's collection is a retrospective. My thesis is of necessity not a retrospective, but a contemporary survey. It concerns itself less with British film history, and more with how the films under discussion reflect where we find ourselves now.

A central note has been sounded, in the debate on heritage among British scholars, as to whether or not the heritage film can be identified as an industry. This is a word which ties it to concepts of tourism, commodification and money. In seeking to define what a heritage film is, Higson asserts that the term is:

> a critical invention of recent years, loosely applied to a group of contemporaneous British films … which are all the product of a culture and an economy in which the heritage industry – the commodification of heritage, the commodification of the past – has become highly visible. (1996: 234)

Higson's view of Merchant-Ivory productions is that they 'may be seen as a relatively conservative and nostalgic attempt to turn away from contemporary realities and seek an image of national stability in some golden age of the past.' (1995: 273) Following on from this, he asks 'whether such films can still usefully be understood as the products of a national cinema, or whether the national in national cinema always invokes the myth of consensus'. (1995: 273) He explicitly links ideas regarding the past, nostalgia, myth and consensus to the

goal of commodification, and in so doing also echoes Williams' insistence that we look beyond 'the recurrent myth of a happier and more natural past' (2016: 56).

Hill takes Higson's view of heritage as an industry, but emphasises its cultural dimension: 'if the heritage industry has been seen to play a significant economic role, it has also been regarded as performing a number of cultural functions as well.' (1999: 74) Hill's sense that the 'heritage which these films construct … is not only historical but also cultural' (78) is exemplified by his discussion of the cultural hybridity of contemporary representations of Britain on screen in the two collaborations between Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammie and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). Hill's conclusion is that certain films of the 1980s may have continued to address national concerns 'not to project a unified notion of national identity and national culture but in order to offer a much more fluid, hybrid and plural sense of 'Britishness' than earlier British cinema generally did.' (1999: 241) His contribution to the heritage debate is to acknowledge the place of 'ongoing transcultural dynamics' (244) in discussions centring on a national cinema. In a subsequent essay, he sounds a note of optimism: 'while the British cinema may no longer assert the myths of 'nation' with its earlier confidence, it may nonetheless be a cinema which is more fully representative of national complexities than ever before.' (2009: 19) In expressing these sentiments, Hill anticipates the cultural hybridity of the work of British filmmakers of the new century on whose work this study focuses, such as Arnold, Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley.

In a careful response to the arguments of Higson and Hill, Monk's timely call for 'urgently needed new critical responses and debates' (2002: 195) voices her concern as to 'how the origins of the heritage-film idea and critique as a response to the specific cultural-political circumstances of the 1980s produce limitations.' (183) Her conclusion as to the origins of these limitations is that:

> the derogatory coinage of the term 'heritage film', and the definition of the films in terms of ideological and aesthetic shortcomings, were symptomatic of the fact that heritage cinema was fundamentally defined from – and by – a top-down reading perspective which distanced itself from the films and their audiences. (183)

This chapter and the next build on Monk's suggestion that the very term 'heritage film' is 'derogatory coinage'. She both crystallises the flaw in the heritage debate and implies the reason underpinning the distancing, as previously discussed, on the part of contemporary British films from being categorisable as heritage cinema. This is a position that arises from the filmmakers' resistance to being strait-jacketed, critically speaking, by what Monk calls the 'top-down reading perspective' with its attendant implications of elitism and snobbery. It is a view shared by Amy Sargeant, whose essay 'Making and Selling Heritage Culture' shows her to be, like Higson, realistic about the commodification of heritage: 'Tourism is a major earner of foreign currency for Britain and heritage is vital to the appeal of Britain as a tourist destination' (2000: 308). But, at the same time, Sargeant points out the need to be wary of 'an aesthetic prejudice against and dismissiveness of the heritage product.' (304) Monk and Sargeant fully acknowledge the paradoxical nature of the heritage debate – that, on the one hand, both filmmakers and scholars recognise that there is a place for heritage as product and, on the other, neither is free of the taint of condescension towards the films' aesthetic value.

A more class-centred reading of the heritage debate is offered by Phil Powrie who focuses on a trio of British films, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), *The Long Day Closes* (1992) and *Small Faces* (1995), to make the case for these films qualifying as what he terms 'alternative heritage', because 'they focus on and frequently aestheticise the working class or the lower middle class rather than the upper middle class of 'bourgeois heritage''. (2000: 317) Powrie describes the films' non-linear approach to narrative as an 'allegory of the nation as a

nostalgic yoking together of fragments' (324) and concludes that the films 'are sufficiently and multiply different from 'bourgeois heritage' that one can see them as a distinct sub-genre. Located so firmly in difference, the sub-genre radically decentres the idea of the nation, of national identity and of national cinema'. (326) Powrie's thesis, that these films represent an alternative heritage cinema based on class, regionality and an approach to storytelling more cyclical than linear, is refreshing in that he makes explicit the connection between the idea of our national past as a myth, and our interpretation of this past as fragments of personal memory. In so doing he acknowledges the inherent variability and even instability of our relationship with heritage. What this thesis applies to contemporary British cinema, however, is his notion that the films, as a sub-genre, radically decentre ideas of nation, national identity and national cinema. This study argues that what might have been a sub-genre two to three decades ago, as suggested by Powrie, is now fully grown into a genre exemplified by the contemporary British films under discussion. *Kill List, Tyrannosaur* and *Wuthering Heights,* three films released within a few weeks of each other in Autumn 2011, offer a kind of decentred cinema. In it, the action unfolds in a location that identifies as an interzone, either an urban or a rural land of the dead, that is far from any geographical or spiritual idea of a centre.

In addition to Monk, Sargeant and Powrie, Murray Smith makes a useful contribution to the discussion around heritage cinema by pointing out the schism between:

> 'traditional' heritage culture, and a more sceptical and ironic practice which both appeals to notions of cultural heritage while also mocking them for their anodyne character … We might label this alternative (anti) tradition 'garbage culture', given its central aim of rubbishing heritage culture, often through an insistent focus on the run-down and the clapped-out, on sites of destitution and poverty. (2002: 25)

For Smith, who is writing about the film *Trainspotting* (1995), heritage is 'overwhelmed and undercut by its doppelganger, garbage' (26). However in suggesting, as I do in this chapter and the next, that contemporary British films revolt against heritage culture, it does not necessarily follow that their project, as is the case with the characters in *Trainspotting*, is to denigrate it. Some of the films play out against 'sites of destitution and poverty' but this is less from an aim of opposing heritage culture, and more with the intention of telling the truth. Smith's distinction between heritage and garbage culture is useful, but the distinction needs to be made that in the films under discussion scepticism and irony are not an end in themselves.

Unquiet Earth

This chapter has discussed approaches to a working definition of what a heritage film is, in historical, political and aesthetic terms. Previous chapters have argued that the aesthetic tension which gives contemporary British films their combination of uneasiness and viscerality arises from the way in which the films invest landscape with atmospheres of eerie or anti-pastoral. This chapter argues that these films also connect to ideas of heritage in their investigation of two related but separate modes of feeling: nostalgia for a lost utopia, and ambivalence about national identity. The former is implied if we read the films as laments for, respectively, the chivalric and the pastoral, and the latter if we read the films' sense of lives lived on the margins as a confirmation of their status as a decentred national cinema. A contemporary British film that explicitly contends with notions of heritage cinema, as previously defined in this chapter, is *Wuthering Heights*. Like her peers Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley, Arnold conjures an atmosphere of disaffection and disenfranchisement through her use of landscape, space and place but, crucially, does so from within the boundaries of what might generically be termed a heritage film. Superficially, Arnold's treatment of Emily Bronte's 1847 novel conforms to a style, that of costumed

realism, typical of other literary adaptations such as the Merchant Ivory films of Forster's novels. Yet it possesses a force and freshness whose roots lie in its introduction and opposition of two additional genres, namely documentary and ghost story. This juxtaposition results in an aesthetic tension between our heritage-based expectations of a cinematic pageant, and the realism of Arnold's muddy, elemental and forensically accurate recreation of working life on a remote Yorkshire farm two centuries ago.

One insight into how this is achieved is Arnold's deployment of regular cinematographer Robbie Ryan, who also photographed *Catch Me Daddy,* as discussed in Chapter One. In *Wuthering Heights* Ryan's camerawork lends immediacy because it is hand-held, a technique to which Jonathan Murray attaches great value: 'the striking immediacy, flexibility and ubiquity of Arnold's preferred hand-held shooting style, a device so central that it might conceivably obscure the visual sophistication and ambition of her directorial practice.' (2016: 207) Other evidence of the deceptive sophistication of this practice includes the choice of academy ratio, which subverts expectations of a more picturesque landscape format by offering instead a portrait frame of 1.37:1. At the same time, this aggregated sense of authenticity is counterpointed and undercut by the frequent use of expressionistic lighting to suggest fire, rain, light and shadow as an extension of the delirious extremes of the characters' emotional states. If we are expecting Higson's 'elite, conservative vision of a national past' from a screen adaptation of *Wuthering Heights,* we are misremembering the ferocity of the original novel. Nonetheless, the shock remains upon encountering Arnold's interpretation of a heritage film that it should be so far from the stately pace of a Merchant-Ivory adaptation, and closer instead in style to hand-held, ground-level mayhem.

An example of the film's combination of realism and expressionism can be found mid-way through *Wuthering Heights* when we first encounter Heathcliff returning as an adult. In an exterior wide shot of the North York Moors, the camera fixes on a bank of fog for almost a

minute of screen time. On the soundtrack we hear bleating sheep, running water and soughing wind until, just when it seems the shot has been held for too long, a distant figure steps out from inside the cloud and walks towards us. It reveals itself in mid-shot to be Heathcliff, from his appearance more prosperous than we have seen him before, thus establishing an important story point without dialogue. Despite the powerful atmosphere created by the combination of desolate weather and natural location, Arnold's style is restrained, notable as much for what she chooses not to do as for what she does to convey this important dramatic beat of the narrative. There is no distorting wide-angle lens for emphasis, nor do we move in to a close-up or circle the subject to suggest his emotional state, nor is there ominous music to heighten anxiety. The simplicity of style in counterpoint with the volatility of much of the content of *Wuthering Heights* works as a strategy to augment its power.



The older Heathcliff returns in *Wuthering Heights* (2011)

This sequence of Heathcliff's return illustrates how Arnold synthesises period drama, documentary and ghost story tropes, and in so doing revitalises the heritage film. Aspects of the *mise-en-scène*, such as the period costume and dramatic location, belong to the literary adaptation. The camera technique, in order to artificially create the illusion of a found

moment that appears unstaged but in fact is not, borrows from documentary. This moment, in which emotions of recognition and fear are intermingled as a familiar but changed figure steps out of a wall of fog, suggests a ghost story. Finally, Heathcliff's presence where we expected an absence defines the scene as belonging to the eerie.

More remarkable than Arnold's hybridisation of genres in *Wuthering Heights* is its emphasis of violence as a means of subverting any conventional expectations attendant on a standard literary adaptation. In order to reflect the film's overall aesthetic of interleaving tropes familiar from literary fiction, documentary and the ghost story as a strategy to destabilise the audience while also enhancing the story's power, its presentation of violence is accordingly provocative. The film's many graphic depictions range from a snared rabbit having its neck snapped, to dogs being hanged, to the spectacle of human beings in extremis: being flogged, in labour, coughing blood, dying of TB and indulging in necrophilia. The bleak landscape of the North York Moors is the canvas onto which Arnold paints this violence thickly, like a kind of impasto. This is a space so elemental and titanic that it appears not only indifferent to, but able to draw power from, the suffering of the creatures living and dying within it. One of the film's major themes is the lack of distinction between human and animal, exemplified by the scene where young Hindley and Frances rut out of doors after dark, where the camera frames them in semi-silhouette against the moorland so that they are barely visible, and only from their magnified gasps do we infer that the sounds come not from livestock but human beings.



Young Cathy and Heathcliff as natural phenomena

Jonathan Murray organises the director's key thematic preoccupations under three headings: the individual and the social, the animal, and the visual. The territory of Arnold's film is a triangulation between these three areas, and Murray further underlines the importance to the filmmaker of the connection between childhood and the animal: 'Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* therefore pivots on the conception – and celebration – of childhood as the stage in the human lifecycle when people are most aware and accepting of the animal qualities of existence' (2016: 205). In light of this, the film depicts Cathy and Heathcliff, as children and then as young adults, finding an escape from the drudgery of quotidian life on Earnshaw's farm. They do this through their shared delight in nature, which Arnold articulates as a numinous sensibility – that foreshadows their adult passion - for natural phenomena that might also be termed quintessential things: the feather of a lapwing, the mane of a horse ruffled by the wind off the moor, the peat bogs as mist descends. Murray's point is key to an understanding of what differentiates Arnold's approach from that of the more conventional period dramas as discussed at the start of this chapter. In celebrating the physical, she prioritises the human animal, and by extension our shared common humanity, over outward projections of heritage. So Arnold's revolt against heritage manifests as a lack of deference towards the outward

trappings of a literary adaptation such as, for example, observing the boundaries of what might be considered good taste in the representation of violence. In dispensing with prestige and instead focusing on transposing Bronte's original story to a sensual, physical, violent screen universe, Arnold balances her own preoccupations with 'the animal qualities of existence' on the one hand, and fidelity to the strangeness of the source material on the other.

The final lines of Bronte's novel refer to Cathy and Heathcliff, lovers now united in death, as sleepers:

> I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath, and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth. (1976: 338)

For her film of a novel written nearly two centuries earlier, Arnold takes Bronte's triangulation of landscape, love and death and superimposes upon it her own triangulation, as outlined by Murray, of the individual and the social, the animal and the visual. On screen, the resultant matrix of dissonances finds its fullest expression through landscape. Where lyricism and tranquillity underlie the stormy contradictions of Bronte's original vision, the underlying earth of Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* is unquiet and inhospitable. Why, apart from the observation of authenticity required of a realistic portrayal of the Yorkshire climate, does she depict the environment as a place of such ferocity? Bronte's sense of place is poetically bleak, but Arnold moves beyond this to create a screen world where violence is so ubiquitous as to suggest a nihilism about the land itself. At times there are elements of a fourth genre, horror, at work in this hybridisation of a heritage film, so pregnant with violence is this triangulation between human, animal and wilderness. For Arnold the natural state of the human individual is not to be civilised but to be close to a beast. Her Yorkshire landscape is a

wounded land where signs of life such as flowers and water are solitary and brackish, and primarily affiliated with death. Consequently, one reading of the film's unflinching gaze upon acts of bestiality, culminating in Heathcliff's final grief-stricken jump into the peat to rape Cathy's corpse, as discussed at the opening of this thesis, is that if we are in England, Yorkshire, this climate, then we are already in the grave. These are not questions typically asked by the traditional heritage film.

A further departure from received notions of a period literary adaptation is Arnold's choice of casting black actors to represent the younger and the older Heathcliff. Michael Lawrence, in his study of the film's representation of nature and the non-human, equates its treatment of the natural environment to its handling of race, suggesting that the film's 'preponderance of unmotivated shots of the countryside and its non-human inhabitants demonstrates a post-humanist distribution of attention that not only exceeds the perspectives of its human protagonists but also challenges popular ideas about the novel and subverts the conventions of narrative cinema' (2016: 178). From this opening thesis that *Wuthering Heights* pushes at the limits of both human perspectives and narrative conventions, Lawrence develops an argument that the film also challenges political conventions:

> The decisions to make Heathcliff a runaway or abandoned slave, and to have non-human beings feature so prominently, combine to produce a period drama or literary adaptation that is inherently political due to its revelatory exposure of the history of multiculturalism in England and the realities of cross-species interactions in agricultural landscapes. (2016: 180)

In this Lawrence, like Murray, connects Arnold's uses of human individual, animal and space and concludes that the film 'presents a post-humanist pastoral to counter the benign view of nature' (2016: 183). Rather than his insistence that the film be categorised as a post-humanist

work, what is most valuable in Lawrence's study is the prominence he gives to the idea of cross-species interactions. This, allied to the notion of non-human perspectives, enhances its status as a generic hybrid mixing period drama with other elements such as, for example, the wildlife documentary. Interactions across species are a key visual motif, and lyrical imagery such as solitary birds, trees, animals and crags is juxtaposed with moments of physical violence such as Hindley's explosive temper, Frances in labour, the Lintons' dogs attacking Heathcliff or the rapidly changeable weather itself. The foreground tension between the lyrical and the violent is offset by the background menace implicit in the wider landscape, to create a supercharged, in-the-moment aesthetic of walking along a spiritual precipice. It is a landscape that immediately evokes the pestilence in the ditch. Arnold uses the incongruity of these documentary-style interactions, of these spasms of graphic violence within a rustic period drama, to bestow upon her film, and her Heathcliff, a mongrel identity. At the same time this alienates us and, by the disturbing nature of its implications, persuades us to reflect that it might be the truth.



Young Heathcliff: a mongrel identity

A Space Without Boundaries

According to Murray, Arnold's earlier film *Fish Tank* 'functions not only as a remarkably sensitive portrayal of one person's uncomfortable accession into adulthood, but also as an

acute anatomisation of a paradoxical push and pull that influences the personal experience and expectations of many more within contemporary Britain' (2016: 200). It has been explored how *Wuthering Heights* similarly maps this 'uncomfortable accession into adulthood', where the immediacy of the experience of watching the film is provided by Arnold's application of this 'acute anatomisation' not, as with her earlier work, to a contemporary milieu, but instead to a nineteenth-century setting. It has been demonstrated how, for Arnold, observing the conventions germane to, for example, a prestigious BBC screen adaptation of a literary novel, such as story and plot, is not the priority it would be to many filmmakers. Instead, in her hands a costume drama becomes a cinematic wooden horse concealing the true themes of the film: free spirits, and their imprisonment. Cathy and Heathcliff are a continuation of a line of trapped protagonists in Arnold's films, from Jackie (Kate Dickie) and Clyde (Tony Curran) in *Red Road* to Mia (Katie Jarvis) and Conor (Michael Fassbender) in *Fish Tank*, all of them variations on the figure of the Romantic outsider, as typified by the early nineteenth-century poetry of Byron and the painting of Caspar David Friedrich. The crucial development with *Wuthering Heights* is its identification of environment, in this instance rural as opposed to the earlier films' urban locales, as something not merely oppressive, but fatal.

The nature of how these spaces are realised is what gives *Wuthering Heights* its intensity, a quality which differentiates it from the more comfortable boundaries of the conventional heritage film as proposed by Higson. For Sue Thornham: 'These sensations, of a space without boundaries and of objects and non-human lives so intensely realised that they arrest narrative and produce a gaze that is so close that it seems like touch, are also those evoked by Arnold's moors' (2016: 222). In this way, Thornham links the use of gaze and space in the work of Arnold and implies that this sense of a lack of boundaries, and indeed unboundedness, is fundamental to an understanding of the aesthetic of *Wuthering Heights*.

Thornham's reading of the film is informed by what she describes as the 'oppressive and arbitrary' boundaries in Arnold's cinematic landscape which lead her to suggest that 'in the film they constitute an insistent presence beneath, or within, the ordered framing which is our more usual mode of viewing landscape' (2016: 224). Here the implication is that, by strategies such as camera angles and lighting, the spectator is made to not view landscape in a conventional fashion. This sense of porousness of boundaries can be illustrated by a consideration of some sequences from the film itself.

Firstly, the film opens inside an empty room, on whose wall we see what looks to be a child's drawing of a house. We cut to a young man in the room looking at the drawing; to a tree's twigs outside the window insistently scraping on the glass; inside, the man moves to the window and we see a bruise on his temple; he looks at the initials CE (what we will later learn stand for Cathy Earnshaw) scratched onto the wall; he throws himself violently at the wall, twice; we see the names Catherine and Heathcliff scratched onto the wall; the man sobs; against the window the tree's leaves rustle; the man bangs his head on the floor. This sequence establishes two modes which the film will pursue: the idea, as posited by Thornham, of the presence of boundaries that are both 'oppressive and arbitrary', represented here by the wall but especially the window, a frame which for Julianne Pidduck 'marks the threshold of inside and outside' (1998: 382). This motif of thresholds, both physical and spiritual, is a constant in *Wuthering Heights*, for example in its key theme of the transgression of social taboos by its free spirit protagonists. The second mode established in this opening sequence is that of a visual rather than a verbal approach to a literary adaptation. For Murray, 'the introductory emphasis on visual, as opposed to verbal, storytelling modes – the opening image is not just a picture, but a picture which tells a story – accurately promises a literary adaptation within which the spoken word is kept to a bare minimum' (2016: 211). The combined force of hand-held camera, jagged editing rhythms and the absence of dialogue has

the effect of disorientating us: are we inside or outside, and precisely when are we in terms of time? Thus we are compelled to pay closer attention to the images and associate the use of hand-held camera more with documentary cinema than with period drama.

A second sequence that reveals the film's shifting sense of boundaries is the young Heathcliff's first horse ride. Inside the stable in daytime, from Heathcliff's point of view we see young Cathy bridling the horse. Extreme close-ups are juxtaposed of her auburn hair, her fingers, the horse's ears; a medium close-up of Heathcliff is answered by a medium close-up of Cathy. We cut to, outside on the moors, a wide shot of them sitting together on the horse, Cathy in front, Heathcliff behind, riding bareback through the landscape; a medium shot of him smelling her flowing hair; a closer shot, from his point of view, of her hair in the wind; a close-up of him as he inhales; a close-up of his hand on the horse's flank; a wider two-shot of them riding; finally, a jump cut to them, dismounted, walking away from us through the heather towards distant rocky crags. Here, Arnold creates an implicitly erotic sequence by equating her young protagonists with animal and landscape, as discussed by Murray and Lawrence; but in addition to choreographing a highly sensual montage, she sets up themes of freedom, life and death. The idea of a lifeforce is marked by the elements of youth, their mutual sexual attraction and the aliveness of the horse.

Paradoxically, however, the landscape which to them represents an escape from the oppression of the farm is made of the same earth in which, in only a few years' time while both are still young, Cathy and Heathcliff will be interred. The landscape's dominance is reinforced by the scene's use of sound where, in contrast to the pitch of the wind, human and animal are soundless. We are located precisely in what Thornham describes as 'a space without boundaries and of objects and non-human lives so intensely realised that they arrest narrative and produce a gaze that is so close that it seems like touch' (2016: 222). For Arnold, narrative has to be arrested, as the conclusion towards which it moves is death. What counts

is revelling in the moment itself and watching the young lovers, like mayflies, incandescent in the here and now.



Life inside space in *Wuthering Heights*

A third and final example of Arnold's use of close identification with a character's point of view, to create a sensory interplay between extremes of captivity and freedom, is the scene of the younger Heathcliff's baptism. A silhouette of a tree is followed by a shot of a chapel bell. Inside the chapel we see a prayerbook, followed by a medium shot of Heathcliff, a medium shot of Earnshaw, a wide shot of the congregation, a medium shot of Hindley, then of Cathy, then of the priest officiating; a wide shot of the priest attempting to submerge Heathcliff's head in the font. Next comes a single travelling medium shot of Heathcliff as he bolts from the chapel, following him outside where he jumps over a drystone wall and hides; Cathy comes out to hide with him, and rain starts to fall. The narrative economy belies the power of the filmmaking style: by inflecting every shot so we are experiencing the scene absolutely from Heathcliff's point of view, and anchoring this emotional identification by use of hand-held camera, Arnold augments our sense of the liminality of screen spaces. When physical boundaries such as doors, walls and weather provide no obstacle, the porousness of this created world combines with the strength of ego of the character with whom we empathise to

result in a kind of omnipotent dream-state. It is this combination that transcends any question of *Wuthering Heights* belonging to a recognisable tradition of heritage storytelling.

Dead Nature

This chapter has shown how Arnold transfigures conventional notions of a literary adaptation by splicing together tropes taken from costume drama and documentary. Significant is her use of a third narrative mode, the ghost story, and how it aligns with the wider discussion in this thesis of the subversion of the eerie and the pastoral in contemporary British cinema.

Wuthering Heights could be said to be a film that haunts itself in that, structurally, in its second hour it returns chronologically upon itself.. Two sequences, from early and late in the film, exemplify this. Firstly, after the prologue, whose narrative function as previously discussed is to mark the return of the older Heathcliff after Cathy's death, the actual continuation of the film's opening, which chronicles the arrival of the younger Heathcliff, stylistically resembles a ghost story. An exterior shot, in darkness and at ground level, moves through grass and we see a hooded human figure. Birds circle; the figure looks up, walks away from us into a two-shot and we then perceive the figure is not alone - the other figure is in fact Earnshaw, owner of the moorland farmhouse Wuthering Heights towards which, it will be revealed, the figures are walking. Through fog and rain we see the distant light and shape of a house, our destination. We see rain on puddles and mud, and hear the sound of barking dogs; we move closer to a lighted window, then follow the two figures in through the door over the threshold, all the while remaining behind the hooded figure's head. A dog snarls, and our first sight of the young Heathcliff's face is of him snarling back.

From this it is evident that the introduction of the location of Wuthering Heights itself within the first few minutes of the film via two separate time-frames - a flash-forward to the older Heathcliff's return, and in the linear narrative of the present the arrival of his younger self -

represents an interlinking of temporal non-linearity and of motifs of physical boundaries (windows, doors, walls, hostile weather). This has the combined effect of disorienting the spectator. It is a strategy that creates the illusion of authenticity, in that simulated, documentary-style found moments lend gravitas and truth to what is in fact screen fiction. The addition of generic elements of mystery, such as the hooded figure and the approach by darkness in adverse weather towards a distant lighted window, align it with the atmosphere of a supernatural tale or ghost story.

This relationship established in *Wuthering Heights*, between the crossing of thresholds on the one hand, and the haunting of a character and a place on the other, is returned to in a second sequence at the end of the film depicting the older Cathy's relapse. We see Heathcliff approach the ailing Cathy on her daybed, her hand on his collar, her fingers in his hair, and she asks 'Will you be happy when I am in the air?' This triggers a flashback to their younger selves as in voiceover we hear his reply: 'When you're at peace I shall be in hell'. In the present, she stands; shots of her caged bird and bookmark made of a lapwing's feather, motifs of the film's thematic exploration of the boundaries between freedom and imprisonment, are followed by another flashback, to younger Heathcliff's hand. In the present, Cathy swoons, then her husband Edgar returns, triggering a third flashback to younger Cathy and Heathcliff in darkness. This second sequence reinforces the impression that the entire narrative exists on a temporal loop where traditional narrative causality is replaced, and directed, by spontaneous bursts of emotion. This corresponds to Murray's view that the film 'unfolds as a chain of pregnant, largely wordless vignettes in which an imperfectly maturing human being watches, wonders and wants in relation to his wider world'. (2016: 201) This unites what has beene established as, for him, the film's themes of individual and social, animal and visual, a view further underlined by the fact that these vignettes play with point of view. They depict animal elements in relation to the human world, as evidenced by frames whose content and

composition resemble still life paintings, comprising subjects such as the skulls of birds or animals, feathers and hanging game.

Arnold's awareness and subversion of a fine art tradition, in this case still life, serves two functions: thematic and contra-heritage. The mode of still life painting is known in French as *nature morte,* which translates into English as dead nature. This phrase aptly sums up Arnold's aesthetic strategy in *Wuthering Heights*: the association of landscape with mortality to set up resonances within the film that its spaces are haunted. This underscores the fact that, as well as being a statement of anti-heritage and anti-pastoral, the film returns to previous discussions of the eerie in its use of landscape. The recurrence of imagery combining nature and death, evidenced in the still life compositions, functions as a *memento mori* for the spectator. Furthermore, the use of this device, familiar from the world of fine art, serves to distance us from the events of the narrative and in effect reminds us that we are watching a film. In this respect Arnold's film echoes the use in *A Field in England* of another technique originating in fine art to punctuate the narrative, that of characters arranged in tableaux vivants, or static scenes wherein actors are artfully posed, stationary and silent. In both films this Brechtian effect of alienation, while less overtly employed in *Wuthering Heights* than in Wheatley's film, deliberately disturbs any equilibrium on the part of the spectator. In Wheatley's film the result is to make us question the role of time in the narrative and the eerieness of onscreen space, while in Arnold's the punctuation offered by the still life frames offers a brief pause for reflection amid the profusion of kinetic, hand-held camerawork. Finally, this stylistic boldness of stirring fine art tropes into what is already a hybridisation of costume drama, documentary and ghost story can be read as another manifestation of Arnold's rebellion against conventional notions of heritage.

To conclude, Arnold's aesthetic project in *Wuthering Heights* is to offer a more authentic screenwork within a genre that has often been more widely, albeit contentiously, recognised

as British heritage cinema, and to achieve this by means of narrative democratisation. This idea can be illustrated by the brief analysis of a scene to show how, by deviating from conventional cinematic approaches to signposting a story beat, which a more typical example of a heritage film would embrace, Arnold instead enacts a revolt against heritage. A pivotal moment, or beat, of the narrative of *Wuthering Heights* is young Cathy's first encounter with her wealthy neighbours, the Lintons, which in turn leads to her convalescence at their grand house Thrushcross Grange, followed by her delayed return to the starkly contrasting Wuthering Heights, her gathering notions of grandeur, her rejection of Heathcliff, her marriage to Edgar Linton and Heathcliff's retaliatory union with his sister Isabella. So it would not be an understatement to say that Cathy's discovery of and attraction to the new material world represented by Thrushcross Grange is of considerable narrative significance.

Arnold, however, treats this moment with what appears to be a casualness bordering on perversity. The scene is covered as follows: at the end of another sojourn together on the moors, the weather turns and Cathy and Heathcliff must seek shelter. A bird's eye-view, high-angle, hand-held wide shot frames the two of them in the foreground, almost in miniature because they are dwarfed by the bluff of hills into which they face and which dominates the background of the shot. Then at the foot of the bluff we begin to discern a flickering light, out of focus because of the curtain of rain obscuring it. Cathy sees the light, impulsively runs towards it and Heathcliff follows. Arnold subverts the scene's overtly dramatic content, such as weather, landscape and young lovers, by using the size of the frame to hide, and thereby underplay, the importance of the introduction of Thrushcross Grange and the Lintons. She renders this moment no bigger or smaller than any other in her film, because to do so would be a betrayal of her project of truthfulness. Therefore, what we are observing is a process of narrative democratisation.

As demonstrated, this approach to narrative, as well as to space and to character, represents a revolt against heritage on the part of the filmmaker. Higson defines the signature characteristics of the heritage film as follows: 'Camerawork generally is fluid, artful and pictorialist, editing slow and undramatic. The use of long takes and deep focus, and long and medium shots rather than close-ups, produces a restrained aesthetic of display.' (1996: 233-4) This chapter argues, however, that *Wuthering Heights* does not adhere to Higson's list, to the extent that its refusal of pictorialism results in the opposite: an aesthetic of display that is actively unrestrained and intended to be so. This refusal equates to a stance against authority, which is key to an understanding of Arnold's aesthetic philosophy, and that of the other contemporary British filmmakers under discussion. It represents a continuation of Williams' insistence as to why we must weigh the importance of true history over myth: 'An idealisation, based on a temporary situation and on a deep desire for stability, served to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time.' (2016: 63)

Wuthering Heights redefines heritage cinema by positioning itself against what, led by this perceived 'deep desire for stability', has wrongfully been given priority as a necessary ingredient of a British heritage film, namely literary pedigree and cultural prestige. This provides a context for the revolt against heritage by Arnold and her peers such as Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley. At heart their films ridicule authority, because they see it as representative of a legacy of falsehoods both ideological and aesthetic. Consequently they reject the trappings of this authority, such as pedigree and prestige. In as much as the films are a reaction against the commodification of British heritage, they also constitute a revolt against cinematic falsehood.

Eerie-Pastoral-**Heritage**-Epic

CHAPTER FIVE

HERITAGE (II): BENEATH THE HERITAGE LANDSCAPE



Sightseers (Ben Wheatley, 2012)

Return to the Lost Continent

In the previous chapter the case was made that a strand of contemporary British cinema seeks to redefine a concept, the British heritage film, that was established to be contentious. It framed the argument in terms of notions relative to the conventions of period drama, as exemplified by *Wuthering Heights*. This chapter will now explore the idea that the heritage that these contemporary British films subvert is as much that of the social realist tradition as that of the period drama. In relation to this it will analyse *Sightseers*, because of its facility in twisting the mode of realism, and the rebellious attitude towards notions of heritage which it shares with *Wuthering Heights*. It will develop Hutchings' suggestion that we consider a cinematic tradition lying 'Beneath the heritage landscape' (2004: 27) to argue that, in their rejection of labels such as period drama or social realism, contemporary British films make modest claims to constitute an alternative heritage cinema. It will introduce the relevant literature and then move on to three sections which focus on three specific sequences from

Sightseers. By means of this, it will be demonstrated how it redefines the notion of a heritage film.

As discussed at the start of this thesis, scholars such as Barr and Petley have pointed out the fallacy at the heart of the division in the aesthetic argument, maintained over decades of film studies and criticism. As far back as the 1940s, this locates British cinema either in the realist tradition exemplified by a documentarian such as Humphrey Jennings or in the fantastical tradition exemplified by Powell and Pressburger. In his essay 'The Lost Continent', Petley argues that the legacy of this binary attitude to a national cinema has been aesthetically reductive, and that this unnecessary and irrelevant polarisation based on style has contributed to an ongoing struggle in arriving at a definition of the identity of British cinema:

> One suspects that if the institution of the British cinema could be radically reconceptualised and wrested from the grasp of the still tenacious realist aesthetic, then the films discussed in this chapter would look less like isolated islands revealing themselves, and more like the peaks of a long submerged lost continent. (1986:118)

This thesis argues that where the films discussed in this thesis map on to Petley's metaphor is that, more than thirty years after the publication of his essay, they can in fact be seen as the heirs to his 'isolated islands'. Films as diverse as *Wuthering Heights*, *A Field in England*, *Catch Me Daddy* and *Dark River* may outwardly manifest the attributes of the realist aesthetic but in practice they marry them with inner, more personal concerns to present works that successfully reflect on, and at the same time move beyond, social realist heritage. For example, while both *A Field in England* and *Dark River* adhere to the tenets of realism in that they recognisably constitute narrative cinema distinguished by naturalistic acting, a more defining characteristic of each, as demonstrated in Chapter Three on the pastoral, is a sense that they somehow represent haunted spaces. In the case of Wheatley's film, this is because

the eponymous field is suggested to exist somehow outside of chronological time, and in the case of Barnard's, because of the density of the combined inheritance of abuse and neglect pertaining both to family and to farming community.

These British films of the new century themselves constitute a kind of community so that, by definition, they are screenworks that do not conform to the binary aesthetic as outlined above. No longer 'isolated islands', they instead signify, at long last, the re-emergence of Petley's 'lost continent'. Petley himself suggests they may represent only the beginning, while drawing a line under the heritage debate: 'Thus, there is still a great deal of the 'lost continent' left to explore, even if, as Hill quite rightly argues, the old realism/fantasy opposition has by now long outlived its usefulness.' (2019: 484) Key to this idea, of the films under discussion representing a resurfacing of Petley's lost continent, is the acknowledgment that they transcend 'the old realism/fantasy opposition' and that their shared heritage is distinct from that suggested by Higson in relation to Merchant-Ivory films, as discussed in the previous chapter. Rather it approximates more closely to the dark heritage which Hutchings defines:

> 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. (2004: 28)

The menacing nature of the spaces, urban and rural, is is recognisable in all the contemporary British films under discussion. This thesis examines how their shared darkness of tone arises from their employment of a conjunction of concepts of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic. Hutchings makes the important distinction that these British films' darkness does not exclude them from commerciality or accessibility, but emphasises that they 'signify Britishness'. This

point is essential to his overall argument, and to this thesis: that we look beyond, and beneath, conventional notions of what constitutes a national cinema, to comprehend that what we thought were islands might be, in fact, a continent.

Returning to a point made in the Introduction, Hutchings also emphasises that we should consider alternative interpretations of our landscape's presence on screen to that offered by conventional notions of the heritage film:

> There is yet another type of landscape to be found in British film and television … 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. (2004: 29)

This notion of a British anti-landscape suggests, beyond its affinities with the land of the dead, a territory that is home to paradoxical opposites. These include the beautiful countryside host to a latent violence (*Witchfinder General*, *A Field in England*), the agricultural space lying fallow (*The Selfish Giant*, *Dark River*), and the elemental Yorkshire moorland pregnant with death and decay (*Wuthering Heights, Catch Me Daddy*). These paradoxes translate into a series of aesthetic dissonances which it has been argued constitute a combination of eerie, anti-pastoral and anti-heritage. Hutchings points out that the anti-landscape: 'suggests in a more intuitive way that the relationship between the people and the land is complex and fraught with uncertainty.' (2004: 39) While something of an understatement, Hutchings' claim is important because, like Williams, he argues both for the centrality of the relationship between the people and the land, and for a less superficial, and less heritage-based, interpretation of this relationship. This is reflected in his call for a more complex reading of the role of tradition:

> In these (British film and TV) 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. (2004: 39)

This echoes Petley and advances the claims of an alternative, less rational kind of tradition in British cinema. As discussed in Chapter Three, it also returns us to the legacy of the Enclosures Acts and to their founding role in the ambivalent attitude to the pastoral spanning, for example, the poetry of Clare and the films of Barnard. Beyond this, Hutchings' ideas of repetition and regression are significant to the discussion of contemporary British cinema in their implication that, in order to successfully interrogate our heritage landscape, we need to consider, literally and metaphorically, what lies beneath it.

It can be argued, moreover, that what constitutes heritage in the films is the buried itself. Often it is at the junction of landscape and death that a revelation opens up, such as the scene at Cathy's grave in *Wuthering Heights*, with which this thesis opens. The dead haunt *Dead Man's Shoes, A Field in England* and *Dark River*, whether in the form of the actual ghost of Richard's brother Anthony, or the discovery that the treasure for which the soldiers dig is a human skull, or the implied ghost of Alice and Joe's father. The striking image chosen to promote *Tyrannosaur* even shows a giant prehistoric skeleton beneath the earth, representing the dead wife of protagonist Joseph (Peter Mullan) and the psychic force she continues to exert. Here the catalyst for the transfiguration of space into something psychically charged is, demonstrably, the process of unearthing.



Poster for *Tyrannosaur* (2011)

Certain Received English Romantic Ideals

Thus far this chapter has considered how the films under discussion use landscape to reimagine the concept of heritage as a literal and metaphorical consideration of what lies beneath the surface. A different kind of reimagining, and subversion, of heritage is represented by *Sightseers*, Ben Wheatley's third feature film which, in taking a comedic approach to heritage, also ridicules the very idea of tourism in the UK. As discussed at the start of the previous chapter, for Higson: 'One of the central pleasures of the heritage film is the artful and spectacular projection of an elite, conservative vision of the national past.' (1996: 233) *Sightseers* is a darkly comedic chronicle of a caravanning couple on a killing spree across the north of England. As such it does anything but conform to Higson's definition, but instead gleefully sends up any notion of an 'elite, conservative vision'. Furthermore, the film uses comedy to make serious points about our relationship with our national past, such as its location of grotesque murders at heritage sites including the Crich Tram Museum and Kimberley Stone Circle. In this way, its protagonists deal as much with the repressed and the past as the characters of the above-mentioned, more conventionally

dramatic films. History is as latent in the onscreen spaces of *Sightseers* as in either *Dead Man's Shoes* or *Dark River*. It is merely that *Sightseers* plays its relic traces and landscape ghosts for laughs.

Written by, and starring, Steve Oram and Alice Lowe as cagoule-wearing Brummie ramblers Chris and Tina, *Sightseers* fuses the road movie genre with a sociological tract on the British class system. The narrative follows two thirtysomething lovers, Chris and Tina, who leave the house of the latter's controlling mother (Eileen Davies) for a week's caravanning holiday around the north of England. Their carefully planned itinerary includes heritage destinations such as the Crich Tram Museum and Fountains Abbey. But what begins as a hoped-for journey towards self-actualisation, as well as, according to Chris, an 'erotic odyssey', mutates into something more violent. First Chris then Tina succumb to petty, primal urges and begin murdering fellow sightseers for perceived transgressions ranging from dropping litter to addressing them as social inferiors. The killing spree ends at their final destination, the Ribblehead Viaduct, where Tina breaks their pre-agreed death pact and lets Chris plummet alone to his death, leaving herself free presumably to continue the serial killing for which she's acquired a taste. Arguably, Chris and Tina have indeed self-actualised, just not in the way they envisaged.

J.M.Tyree describes *Sightseers* as 'a highly sophisticated and rebelliously entertaining cinematic and literary prank at the expense of certain received English Romantic ideals regarding nature, travel, and love.' (2016: 39) This identifies its strengths, and can be developed to maintain that the film's thematic complexity is deceptively sophisticated, blending questions of identity, artistic self-expression and the individual versus society through a nuanced mapping of the psychological development of the protagonists. It is also recognisably a genre film, a plot-driven road movie whose narrative beats are clearly structured around an escalating series of murders, and thus effective as commercial

entertainment. What is most significant , however, in Tyree's point is the idea of *Sightseers* being a rebellion and a prank at the expense of 'certain received English Romantic ideals'. These received ideals are the same persistent set of notions discussed previously in this thesis, aligning heritage with ideas of the picturesque, propaganda and the false, as opposed to what Williams terms a 'true history of the English countryside'. (2016: 85)

As discussed at the start of Chapter Four, pairing *Sightseers* with *Wuthering Heights* in a discussion of heritage cinema is apposite, because both screenworks constitute a revolt against heritage, and their different aesthetic approaches, while superficially different, are complementary. Arnold's literary adaptation finds freedom and authenticity in a physical intoxication with landscape approximated by her dynamic *mise-en-scène*. She achieves this while remaining faithful to Tyree's 'English Romantic ideals' regarding nature and love, in that she is faithful to the spirit of Brontë's novel, which in turn contributed to the origination of these ideals. Wheatley's film, on the other hand, punctures any sense of the ideal to the extent that *Sightseers* can be read as a riposte to *Wuthering Heights*, with Chris and Tina a contemporary anti-Heathcliff and anti-Cathy. The Romanticism preserved in the Bronte adaptation by virtue of its characters wearing breeches or gowns, and striding or riding across the moors of North Yorkshire , is undercut in *Sightseers* whose passionate lovers wear cagoules instead of waistcoats, and travel not on foot or horseback, but by car and caravan. Heathcliff and Cathy love their wild landscape, pursue each other through it and demonstrably belong to it, to the extent that both are buried within it. Whereas Chris and Tina, in the opportunities they have to contemplate the dramatic scenery of their journey, ignore its majesty. Instead they either dwell on some trivial grievance or, in a contravention of Romantic ideals relating to nature, avoid the outdoors and disappear inside their caravan in order to have sex. This use of bathos in *Sightseers* positions it as a parody not only of

Wuthering Heights but of Tyree's 'certain received English Romantic ideals' and, beyond that, of heritage itself.

Sightseers can be seen as belonging to an unofficial tradition of British films that sets out to undermine or subvert conventional notions of heritage, usually by using character-based comedy to conceal what is a rebellion against what might be described as the status quo of stereotypical, picture-postcard images of national tourism. This is typified by Bruce Robinson's 1986 film *Withnail & I*, where an escape from oppressive London to a cottage in the Lake District proves the opposite of a vacation, and instead of the expected idyll the two protagonists experience hostile weather, animals and locals. Comedy is generated through the characters', and our own, ideals of the rural being undercut by the often grotesque reality. A scene that crystallises the film's mood of revolt against heritage is when, in the staid village tearoom, the rowdy behaviour of the two drunken, urban protagonists results in the elderly locals asking that they leave. The demand by Withnail (Richard E. Grant) that 'We want the finest wines available to humanity! We want them here and we want them now!' is a rebel's *cri de coeur* against the tourist board façade of a Lake District tearoom. The community wins this battle as the outsiders leave, but the defiance of Withnail's parting lines is significant in that it lays down a marker: 'We'll be back! We're coming back in here!'

A similar theme of non-conformist individuals pushing back against a self-satisfied, backward-looking rural community recurs in Edgar Wright's 2006 film *Hot Fuzz*. However, it is taken to more violent extremes in its revelation that a cabal of senior citizens in a sleepy West Country town is murdering people who have deviated from local ideals of good taste and conformity. The action climax of *Hot Fuzz* mirrors the outsiders' rebellion in the tearoom in *Withnail & I*, but builds upon it in that the protagonists embark upon a firefight with the armed elderly residents and in so doing destroy, literally and symbolically, the picturesque town square. This trope, of the confrontation and, if necessary, destruction of heritage, is

repeated in a later scene of *Hot Fuzz* where the chief villain (Timothy Dalton) is captured in a model village and the protagonist tells him: 'It's not your village anymore.' This phrase amounts to a manifesto of the filmmakers: by incongruously setting a parody of a violent Hollywood action movie in the rural West of England, they not only generate humour through bathos but also, in literally destroying our heritage, reclaim the territory as their own. Like its aesthetic relatives *Withnail & I* and *Hot Fuzz*, beneath its comedy *Sightseers* wants us to consider whether the popular images associated with the heritage British landscape constitute in fact a commodified façade, behind which lie uncomfortable truths about the narrow-minded natures of rural communities. All three films explore fears relating to this idea by effectively satirising tourism, and all manifest as what might be termed anti-Romantic in that, to return to Tyree's point, they offer up jokes at the expense of certain received Romantic ideals. In this, their project is to probe the gap between touristic illusion and reality.

According to Ben Walters: 'There's a strain of television and filmmaking that might be called British bathetic bucolic – a semi-absurdist mode in which sublime natural landscapes form the backdrop for neurotic urban odd couples getting holidays wrong.' (2012: 30) For him *Sightseers* sits within this strain, and Walters cites Mike Leigh's 1976 television film *Nuts in May*, *Withnail & I* and Michael Winterbottom's 2010 film *The Trip* as other examples of screenworks that provide 'rude awakenings from delusions of Romanticism.' (2012) Moreover, it is their shared alienation from place that unites the ramblers (Roger Sloman and Alison Steadman) of *Nuts in May*, the out-of-work actors (Grant and Paul McGann) of *Withnail & I* and the vacationing comedians (Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon) of *The Trip*. What is further relevant about Walters' point is how the mode which he defines as 'British bathetic bucolic' can be read as an iteration of the anti-pastoral, as discussed in the previous two chapters, and as such it fits into the wider discussion in this thesis of how contemporary British cinema uses landscape to redefine concepts of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic. As an

illustration of this 'British bathetic bucolic', in both *Sightseers* and *Dark River*, as discussed in Chapter Three, the pastoral ideal is revealed to be a sham, but the former utilises bathos to make us reflect upon the disparity between illusion and reality in a comedic way, rather than the dramatic approach of the latter. Another echo of the anti-pastoral provided by Walters is that a puncturing of the pastoral takes place: 'deflation comes as standard in the bathetic-bucolic mode, in which characters often have pretensions to post-Romantic notions of fruitfully communing with nature.' (2012) Thus what originates as a quip at the end of *Hot Fuzz*, 'It's not your village anymore', becomes a rallying cry for British contemporary cinema united by a rebellious attitude towards notions of heritage. Thus, it has been established that a different kind of heritage cinema is possible, and these films offer that alternative. However, being anti-tourism and anti-Romantic does not necessarily equate with a stance that is anti-heritage; merely that, as will be shown by a consideration of three key sequences of *Sightseers*, a redefinition is being sought, and offered, of the British heritage film.

The Power of Nature

There are three pivotal sequences from *Sightseers* which each show, in contrasting but linked ways, that the film's attitude towards heritage is a radical one. Each sequence uses the technique of montage, that is a non-linear, visual and aural assemblage, in order to provoke a consideration that the film's use of, respectively, landscape, history and genre is underpinned by a deeper engagement with questions of what precisely heritage is. The first sequence, approximately one third of the way into the film, shows the first premeditated murder carried out by Chris. As such it constitutes a major dramatic beat in the overall structure of the story, as it represents what in screenwriting terms would be called the turning-point from the first into the second act.

Up until this moment in the narrative the film has established itself, stylistically speaking, within two modes: social realism, and genre, the latter being specifically the road movie, The road movie genre is typified by films such as *Vanishing Point* (Richard C. Sarafian, 1971), *Radio On* (Chris Petit, 1979) and *Y Tu Mama Tambien* (Alfonso Cuaron, 2001) and its narratives are concerned with the adventures of a character or characters on a journey through a landscape. The opening credit sequence illustrates this duality by intercutting the closely observed, naturalistic behaviour of the caravanning couple's leave-taking of Tina's mother with images of a road map littered with pins and post-it notes. This map will prove to be Chris and Tina's itinerary and also foreshadows the story itself, as their escalating killing spree will be structured around each tourist destination: Crich Tram Museum, Blue John Cavern, Fountains Hall, Kimberley Stone Circle, Mother Shipton's Cave and Ribblehead Viaduct. The opening sequence also serves the function of introducing two of the film's central themes, the British class system and the narrowness of the protagonists' outlook. For example, Mum's house is full of knick-knacks and clutter, a design style despised by Ian (Jonathan Aris) and Janice (Monica Dolan), the middle-class couple whom Chris and Tina later encounter, which marks them out as snobs as opposed to the protagonists who are respectively working- and lower-middle-class. Yet the film's critique of class is more subtle than this and the implication is that, in running away from home and the influence of her controlling, duplicitous mother, Tina is also fleeing her lower-class origins. The limitations of the couple's horizons are shown in their exchange before they drive away, caravan in tow, as Tina says: 'Show me your world, Chris', to which he replies: 'Well, I thought we'd start with Crich Tram Museum'. This is an example of Walters' 'British bathetic bucolic' and 'semi-absurdist mode' in action, the laugh generated by contrasting the breadth suggested by 'world' with the parochial specificity of 'Crich Tram Museum'. Where I would argue, however, that *Sightseers* transcends Walters' somewhat limiting labels is in how it manages

to raise laughs by the continued use of the aforementioned bathos, while at the same time it persuasively maps Chris' and Tina's psychological transformation into killers. This point is crystallised by Chris' line early on after he accidentally runs over the litterer whose casual act has infuriated him: 'He's ruined the Tram Museum for me now'. This both reminds us of Chris' pettiness, and underlines an alarming pathological blindness on his part to the gravity of the fact that he has caused the death of a fellow human being.

As the couple's car and caravan leave motorways and pylons behind on their way towards the rural and the ideal of escape, Soft Cell's 'Tainted Love' plays on the soundtrack in ironic counterpoint, as a sly reminder that there are disturbing undercurrents to Chris' and Tina's love affair. On one level the opening sequence, which ends upon arrival at Crich Tram Museum, can be read as the film's farewell to social realism, a mode with which it briefly dallies in the prologue. In this respect *Sightseers* resembles Wheatley's previous film *Kill List* in that it initially utilises but then dispenses with a mode familiar to the spectator, social realism, as an aesthetic strategy to create authenticity and raise expectations of a certain kind of conventional drama. After which it reverses those expectations in order to play increasingly ambitious tonal variations upon what transforms out of naturalism into a combination of the grotesque, the cartoonish and the disconcerting.

Thus, as we accompany Chris and Tina around tourist destinations, the true nature of the film's project becomes clear: the creation of a dissonance by means of juxtaposing the mundanity of tourism with the emergent psychopathies of the protagonists. This manifests itself in terms of the ongoing deployment of bathos, for example the incongruity of the French chanson 'Amour Toujours, Tendresse, Caresses', replete with suggestions of international romance, heard over shots of the caravan driving through the Yorkshire landscape. It also manifests as haunting insights into character, such as Chris' reflections on nature: 'Take the noble English oak, Old Knobbly. That won't stab you in the back or belittle

your five-year plan'. Chris' mendacity here is another instance of narrative foreshadowing, as we will later find out that, like Roy Tunt in *The Hide* as discussed in Chapter One, he is bitter about the circumstances under which he left his job, and is lying about his past.

So by the time Chris and Tina reach a campsite – a choice of location that seems a response from Wheatley to the more traditional heritage site such as the stately homes of Merchant-Ivory films – we have been provided with worrying clues as to the pathologies of the protagonists of *Sightseers*. These are individuals who feel downtrodden and marginalised, are fugitives from reality and nurse a sense of grievance. The narrative is primed for an event to mark the turning-point from the first into the second act and to give focus to Chris' and Tina's sublimated sense of injustice. What follows is a bravura three-minute sequence intercutting different narrative strands which serves two functions: to advance the story, and to make us see the pastoral English landscape not as a touristic retreat but as a space full of violence and transgression. In this respect it fits with Hutchings' idea, as discussed above, of the British anti-landscape.

Wheatley overlays this montage with Vanilla Fudge's version of 'Season of the Witch', a track which begins as eerie synthesised susurration and ends as loud psychedelic rock, a dramatic progression reflected in the way the onscreen imagery itself builds to a crescendo. Furthermore, the song's title echoes another of the film's themes, Tina's emergence as not just a killer but a person endowed with supernatural powers. As the track begins, we see a wide shot of the sunset over the campsite and hear the drums of the shamanic revellers sharing the site, individuals whose noise and alternative lifestyle have already been established as a source of irritation to Chris. From a gate in a field at dusk, we see Tina alone watching the firelit revels and, in a foreshadowing of her coming liberation as both killer and independent woman, she fantasises that she herself is dancing, participating in ecstatic slow-motion. Meanwhile in bed inside the caravan Chris sulks as in his head he replays the words,

uttered earlier in the day, of fellow caravanner Ian: 'I'm writing a book'. The introduction of middle-class caravanners Ian and Janice develops the theme of class divisions, and Chris' and Tina's visit a few minutes earlier to the rival couple's caravan represents a comedy of manners that steadily deteriorates, until the already resentful Chris feels his frustrated literary ambitions so undermined by Ian's smugness and superiority that he deliberately smashes one of their plates. We have already established that Chris is not unduly worried by causing the death of a casual litterer, so his solution to the perceived slight by Ian, while shocking, will not come as a surprise.

Continuing the sequence, Tina, presumably excited by the sensual abandon of the revellers, now appears inside the caravan, dressed in pink woollen lingerie and looking for sex with Chris, who in his saturnine mood rejects her advances. The pace of the sequence now quickens as it approaches its climax, the rapidity of the editing timed to the rhythms of the surging music. Mirroring the earlier shot of sunset, we now see a wide shot of sunrise over misty, idyllic fields, then a shot of Chris moving through the woods in his rambler's red cagoule, hood up in a faintly diabolic fashion. Panoramic wide shots of the English landscape at dawn follow, the distorting wide-angle lens giving the feeling that we can see off the sides of the earth itself and conferring a cosmic majesty upon the moment. It is a sensation of being at one with nature which the film is about to undercut.

Through this dawn landscape Ian walks his dog, as he mentioned to Chris yesterday that he would, and now each shot shortens and the cuts speed up in time with the bacchanalian frenzy of the music. We cut to a shot of Tina sleeping in the caravan; to a shot of Ian atop a rocky outcrop at sunrise taking a photo with a long-lensed camera; to a shot of Janice preparing to cook eggs in their caravan. Now comes the key juxtaposition of imagery in the sequence: Janice breaks an egg on the rim of the frying pan; Chris, who has climbed up the hill behind Ian, picks up a large stone and swings it at his head; a shaman sacrifices a

chicken; Janice winces in pain as she cuts her bare foot on a shard of plate left where Chris shattered it yesterday. On the hilltop Ian's dog barks; Chris smashes Ian's head repeatedly; the bloody, sacrificed chicken is held aloft; in her sleep Tina calls the name of her dead dog, Poppy, who she believes has been reincarnated as Ian and Janice's dog Banjo. We cut to a wide shot of Ian's dead body lying at the foot of the rocky outcrop. The final shot of the sequence, to a clatter of drum rolls at the end of 'Season of the Witch', is a travelling shot of Chris, hood up, returning to the campsite past the dawn revellers, walking towards the camera and looking into it with a mysterious smile, as if he has finally got something off his chest. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1

This trope, of a character looking into the camera at an ecstatic moment of transgression, is repeated at the end of *Sightseers* immediately before its climax. This is after Chris and Tina have set fire to their caravan and, faces lit by the flames, they gaze defiantly back at us. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2

What, apart from representing a bravura example of the filmmaker's craft, is the significance of this three-minute sequence to the film's overall aesthetic project? Through a virtuosic command of imagery and space, it triangulates the separate elements of landscape, sleep and violence to troubling and compelling effect. By placing images of Chris or Tina throughout the sequence in attitudes of repose or sleep, there is a suggestion that the acts we witness could be either imagined or dreamed by them. Partly, what the above triangulation of elements implies is that, at an unconscious level, we enact our fantasies in dream spaces. These dream spaces return us to Petley's lost continent, because they form part of it, in that they belong to an alternative landscape, one that is not in the grip of a 'still tenacious realist aesthetic' (1986: 118). Whether real or illusory – and the ensuing narrative of *Sightseers* shows that the acts themselves are real, if carried out by individuals in a state of delirium – the sequence can be interpreted as revealing Chris' and Tina's innermost desires. These centre around dancing, sex and homicide, which marks them as dreams of transgression and rebellion against the roles in which they feel society has cast them. The use of the pastoral English landscape as an arena in which these violent acts play out returns us to Hutchings' anti-landscape, and to the points made in earlier chapters about the pattern in certain contemporary British films to depict the landscape as possessing unsettling, even tragic qualities. As the characters of *Sightseers* move through the spaces of its landscape there is a

suggestion that, like the transgressive acts carried out within it, the landscape itself somehow becomes transgressive. The film poses the question: in the same way that Ian walks out early in the morning to be at one with nature, who is to say that Chris, who has also walked out early but with the explicit intention of murdering Ian, is not equally at one with nature?

Positioned at a pivotal point in the narrative, the sense of place conjured by this sequence is so powerful as to exert a hypnotic effect. This is a result not only of its sophisticated non-linear editing, sound design and music but of the unconscious power resident in the juxtaposition of lyrical with brutal, of beautiful scenery with acts of violence. If Chris' and Tina's desires, which they act out with increasing frequency as the narrative progresses, are taboo, one inference might be that the landscape that houses these acts is also somehow taboo. So the sequence illustrates how the film's use of landscape betokens a radical attitude towards heritage, because it invests the landscape with the power of transgression, taboo and dreams. What is indeed radical is the idea posited here that, contrary to the British heritage cinema debated by scholars such as Higson, Hill and Monk and which is essentially realistic and rationalistic, there might be an alternative approach. *Sightseers* embodies this, and it draws on the opposite of a picturesque, touristic commodification of the landscape, and explicitly inhabits the irrational and impulsive. Resonating with Macfarlane's notion of shadow-sites and with Petley's submerged lost continent, this alternative approach might be defined as dream heritage. This is a connection between landscape and elements associated with the unconscious and irrational. It suggests that characters' actions might exist on a borderline between sleeping and waking, and might therefore be dreamed by them, and by us. Dream heritage represents the obverse, unconscious or shadow self of the 'English Romantic ideals' of traditional heritage.

The National Trust?

The second sequence from *Sightseers* illustrating how its configuration of themes contributes to a radical stance towards heritage comes at the midway point of the narrative. The first sequence, as discussed, uses landscape as a means of subverting approaches to heritage; the second sequence also does so, but adds the concepts of history and creativity. In terms of story, after the murder of Ian, the caravanners have departed the campsite with the dog Banjo to continue their sightseeing itinerary despite the rising body count left in their wake. In terms of theme, two areas continue to be developed: the idea of the landscape itself as a liberating influence, and the characters' psychological states as shown by their obliviousness to the tumultuous events caused by and unfolding around them.

Chris' words on being told of Ian's death are: 'It's terrible, isn't it, when people don't have respect for the power of nature.' These are psychologically revealing in that they show both Chris' chilling ability to manipulate the truth and that at a deeper level he is aligning his own power with that of nature, in other words he implies that he is a force of nature. At their next tourist destination, Fountains Hall, in light of the fact that Chris has just committed the far worse transgression of murder, about which he seems unrepentant, even cavalier, Chris' and Tina's appalled reaction to the spectacle of graffiti at a heritage site is grimly ironic. To underline this, Tina's response upon finding out that Chris killed Ian is: 'Can't do a thing like that. Could have ruined the holiday'. Beneath the humour generated by the bathos lies a terrifying emptiness: neither of these characters is capable of feeling empathy for others. It is now, roughly half way through the film, that we are left in no doubt that these are not sympathetic protagonists, but rather anti-heroes who manifest as destructive forces on a trajectory through the screen spaces presented by *Sightseers*.

The four-minute sequence shows Chris' next murder, of a footpath walker at Kimberly Stone Circle. It functions firstly to deepen the film's identity as a genre hybrid, demonstrating that this is now not only a road movie but also a slasher film, and secondly to stir in thematic

questions relating to class hierarchy and nationhood. The opening is an echo of the first shot of the sequence of Ian's murder: a wide shot of sunrise over an English field, but this time with the figures of Chris, Tina and Poppy the dog appearing as distant silhouettes within the frame. Although as with the previous sequence this one uses the technique of montage to counterpoint image and sound in an expressionistic fashion, it begins by employing the naturalistic style of Wheatley's earlier films *Down Terrace* and *Kill List*. This covers action in a combination of hand-held camera, jump cuts and panning on dialogue. By hand-held camera we follow Chris and Tina on their hike at dawn, and receive the visual information that Chris is carrying a large walking stick improvised from a piece of wood he has found, and that at one of the historic stones Tina stops while Chris marches on ahead. She stops because the dog fouls the stone, and the symbolism is already implicit: even this small act manifests the sightseers' rebellious attitude to heritage.

Worse is to follow: we hear a well-spoken male voice off-camera say 'This is a site of natural beauty and geographical interest', which heralds the scene's escalation into a microcosm of class war. The voice is revealed to belong to a middle-aged white male rambler (Richard Lumsden) whom Chris will shortly categorise as a 'Daily Mail reader', and the walker demands that Tina clear up her dog's mess. She refuses, Chris turns back to the stone and now establishes, in what appears to be a petty digression but is consistent with Chris' pathological development, that the walker is privately educated, igniting Chris' simmering sense of social inferiority. 'They still think it's their country, don't they?' he cries, referring to the walker's social class and sense of entitlement before, in a sudden turn to justify the coming act of savagery, he asks Tina: 'Did he touch you?' To the walker's disgust, Tina plays along and makes up a litany of lewd acts the walker threatened to perpetrate upon her. This is enough for Chris, and signals the stylistic turning-point of the sequence, out of

naturalistic coverage into expressionistic montage: he raises his stick and strikes the walker with it repeatedly.

Chris' actions are now filmed in slow motion and accompanied aurally by what seems initially an incongruous device: an older man's voiceover speaking Blake's 'Jerusalem'. The words 'And did those feet in ancient times' are intoned caressingly, with pride, over images of Chris' frenzied attack on the walker. In addition to this, the soundtrack features pastoral music, Edward Elgar's 'Nimrod', that swells to a crescendo over the murder. Thus, a cognitive dissonance is opened up between the savage violence that we are seeing, and the heroic, nostalgic, nationalistic tone of the poetry and music that we are hearing. It is a glimpse of the pestilence in the ditch. Our inference is that, radically, Wheatley is positioning Chris' murder of the walker as an act of patriotism, while the inclusion of Blake and Elgar, with their status in the national pantheon of British high art, deepens associations between the killing and heritage, similarly implying that homicide is an act of heritage.

Chris' assault on the walker is the climax of the scene, reflected in the faster pace of cuts. These alternate slow-motion shots of him, then of Tina, blank-eyed, slipping to a sitting position against the standing stone, then of the dead walker. An extremely low-angle shot of Chris bringing his stick down viciously upon his out-of-frame victim is overlaid with the swelling of Elgar's music as the spoken verse from 'Jerusalem' continues. When Chris raises his arms in triumph, the pose and the accompanying victorious music recall the euphoria of sports highlights after a footballer has scored a goal. He then drags the dead man over to a standing stone and in a final gesture smashes his head against it. At this moment music and voiceover abruptly cut out and Chris quips: 'Report that to the National Trust, mate'.

The textured interplay of humour and violence in this sequence suggests that the film's attitude to heritage be read as not only subversive but also as sacrilegious. The symbolism of

the location is clear, in that the sightseers desecrate a heritage site by means of defecation and murder, but the symbolism applies equally to the wider aesthetic project, both of *Sightseers* and of the other contemporary British films under discussion, which is to desecrate the site of heritage cinema. The rambler is represented as a self-appointed custodian of a certain kind of heritage, whose fate for upholding its principles is to be battered to death by one of our protagonists while the other colludes in the act. A feeling of complicity is enabled,, because by now the viewer is invested in the admittedly highly flawed characters of Chris and Tina and so empathises, on a primal, even childish level, with their disrespect for an authority figure. At the same time a feeling of horror and alienation is mobilised by the transgressive violence of the act itself. In the emotional interzone created by the viewer's profoundly ambivalent reaction to the sequence, Wheatley places associations with British history and culture, in the form of patriotic poetry and music. One interpretation of this is that, with his knowledge of British heritage sites and avowed love of nature, Chris sees himself, not the murdered rambler , as the true custodian of the country's heritage. By this logic 'Jerusalem' and 'Nimrod' are the soundtrack he hears inside his head as he carries out what for him is a righteous act. Another interpretation is that, by integrating into the scene two such highly recognisable examples of British culture as Blake and Elgar, both of whose names resonate with ideals of nationhood, but counterpointing them with violent murder, the film carries out an act of cultural desecration and confronts another taboo: what if Chris is right, and the walker is wrong, and England's green and pleasant land belongs as much to Chris and Tina as to the walker?

To reinforce this idea of ownership of the land, at the end of the sequence as a post hoc justification for his deed, Chris suggests that the class divisions between himself and his victim are a continuation of previous centuries of British society: 'I'd have been a serf and he'd have been the bloody lord of the manor. They call them the good old days'. While Chris

pontificates, Tina looks at the smashed remains of the walker's face in an attitude of what we mistakenly expect to be remorse but proves in fact its absence, as they rifle through the dead man's lunchbox and pull down his trousers to imply to police that he was a sexual predator. At this stage, the film stirs in an affiliation of murder with creativity. Tina, who has previously appointed herself Chris' muse, suggests he write down his ideas: 'I'm musing! I'm musing right now'. Chris starts but quickly puts his notebook away, as Tina says triumphantly: 'I think you've found your oeuvre, Chris'. The sequence ends with paired close-ups of Chris and Tina pressing their faces in a mystical fashion against the standing stones, reminding us that they see themselves as in harmony with nature, history and heritage. With regard to this, the sequence can be read as a vivid interpretation of Hutchings 'dark heritage'.

Tina's notion of murder being Chris' 'oeuvre' is developed by Tyree, for whom the idea of murder as an art form is central to an appreciation of *Sightseers*:

> This insistent binding of creative writing with homicide marks the film as unusually literary, a Thomas De Quincey homage in which murder is considered as a fine art, or, rather, as a kind of substitute for a frustrated artistic impulse. Like De Quincey, Wheatley and his collaborators are engaged in a prank aimed at conventional sensibilities, in which murder is recast as an extreme form of performance art. (2016: 36)

Tyree makes a valid point about the film's literary nature, an example of which is the intertextuality of the reference to Blake's 'Jerusalem', and is perceptive in his alignment of homicide with Chris' frustrated creativity. However, he once more evaluates the film as a prank and in this I argue that his analysis undervalues its sophistication. He underestimates

the fact that, behind a façade of ghoulish comedy, Wheatley's film constitutes less of a prank aimed at, and more of a highly effective deconstruction of, 'conventional sensibilities'.

Something Desirable Out of Reach in the Past

A third and final sequence from *Sightseers* that illustrates the film's subversive stance towards heritage, and which furthermore serves to underline its credentials as a complex and ambitious screenwork rather than a prank, adds genre hybridity to the previously discussed approaches to landscape, history and creativity. Ben Walters describes the film as: 'a unique and provocative confluence of genres, infusing the bathetic bucolic mode with a grand guignol vision of murder as social critique, all mapped onto the quintessentially American frame of a runaway couple's homicidal road trip.' (2012: 30) This reading of *Sightseers* as a 'confluence of genres' correctly locates the film's ambivalence of tone in the dexterity with which it shifts between genres, while remaining within the framework of each of them. Arriving an hour through the narrative, and consisting of a brief montage lasting only thirty-eight seconds, the sequence in question again demonstrates the film's suppleness in stirring a new genre into its subversive formula. It also exemplifies the film's strategy of punctuating what superficially purports to be a social realist narrative with ludic irruptions that hint at a deeper agenda regarding questions of humanity, intertextuality and nationhood.

The sequence begins after Tina, in a jealous rage and to Chris' hypocritical dismay, has murdered a bride-to-be on her hen night, an act which makes her partner's homicidal 'oeuvre' her own. What follows is a non-linear dream sequence, and as such it belongs, as argued earlier in this chapter, to the landscape of dream heritage. It takes place within the sleeping Chris' unconscious mind, accompanied by Wieniawski's Violin Concerto no.2; this is music whose elegant string harmonies, in the immediate aftermath of the preceding scene's grotesque violence, have the effect of simultaneously soothing and shocking us. In a wide

shot of woods in what looks like morning light, we follow a distant female figure clad in a white dress running away from us. The imagery of the woods and the woman in white suggest a familiarity with elements of populargothic fiction. We cut to a reverse of Chris as he follows the figure through the woods. He is wearing a mediaeval smock, implying that he is the serf to which he referred in the walker sequence. With the addition of costume to music the sequence now reads as not only gothic-influenced, but as a period drama. A shot of Chris' hand writing in his notebook, denoting creativity, is followed by a shot of Chris and Tina capering around the standing stone at Kimberley Stone Circle, the site of the walker's murder. We return to Chris in the woods, looking around him uncertainly as he steps forwards; then a close-up of an owl's head as it turns to look at us, marking a moment where the montage accelerates into a cascade of apparently random but, on an unconscious level, closely interconnected images.

Chris sits with Tina's mother at the table of her house; Chris is smothered by a hand whose owner is unseen; Tina walks accompanied by police across the Ribblehead Viaduct, a flash-forward to the film's ending after Tina has reneged on their agreement and let Chris fall to his death. The water at Mother Shipton's Cave swirls ominously with a reddish tint, implying blood; moving with Chris through the woods, we have a sense that he is closer to whoever he is pursuing, and we hear heavy breaths. A wide shot of a clearing in the woods shows it's now night-time, and the white-clad female is lying with a black-gowned figure looming over her throat, its back to us. In a close-up the dark-haired female figure, whose face we do not see, tears flesh out of its victim's throat. A close-up follows of Chris, now wearing a knight's helmet, as he shrieks. The unseen figure bites Chris' throat; it turns from the prone white-clad woman, flings back its black hair and with bloody lips and fangs hisses at us. The sequence ends on Chris waking in the caravan, suffocated by Tina's knitting wool.

It is not revealed in Chris' nightmare which figure is Tina: the vampish woman, or the white-clad victim fleeing through the woods. But two readings can be offered, the first psychological, the second thematic. Firstly, on a psychological level the sequence, its imagery saturated with dread, clearly reflects Chris' mounting insecurities regarding Tina's nascent independence from him as both a killer and a person in her own right. Her manifestation in his unconscious as white-clad maiden or black-clad femme fatale shows that what preoccupies, and terrifies, him is her transformation. Whether she turns into a witch, a killer, her mother or merely an independent person, he has no control over her. This notion of transformation in turn connects to the film's overarching themes of transgression and taboo.

Secondly, in the same way that there is a suggestion that Blake's poem and Elgar's music during Chris' murder of the walker are the soundtrack he hears inside his head, so in his nightmare the tasteful music, period costumes and gothic trappings are his own aesthetic. In other words, he is the director of his own dream. The serf's smock and knight's helmet indicate how Chris sees himself, as a heroic, historic figure saving a damsel in distress. The reality, that he is both literally and metaphorically redundant, links back to the film's theme of reality versus fantasy, and the irony that it is precisely the narrowness of these adventurers' outlook that excludes them from having the adventures for which they yearn. Chris' dream of knightly chivalry is a motif explored in previous chapters in the depiction of other male protagonists of the contemporary British films under discussion, including *Dead Man's Shoes, Kill List* and *Tyrannosaur*. All of these foreground the trope of the latterday knight errant figure who feels disinherited. In *Sightseers* it is Chris' sense of disinheritance, exacerbated by visiting the heritage sites of Britain to which he feels unentitled for reasons of class and culture, that triggers his acts of violence.

To conclude, the theme of inheritance is central to both *Wuthering Heights* and *Sightseers*, and is manifested in their protagonists' ambivalent relationship towards notions of place and

belonging. This returns us to one of Higson's conclusions, that the question 'who shall inherit England?' is central to the area of heritage cinema. Higson defines the heritage question as a union of national, philosophical and geographical concerns. It has been shown in the previous chapter and in this how, within the boundaries of their differing aesthetic approaches, Arnold and Wheatley raise the same questions as those outlined by Higson. These questions pertain to the nature, shape and depth of the land, and to landscape itself. Their methods, however, are to attack, subvert or revolt against the idea of a heritage film as set out by scholars such as Higson. However, in that within them exists the same underlying question – 'who shall inherit England?' – it is paradoxical that *Wuthering Heights* and *Sightseers* remain heritage films. As demonstrated, they seek to puncture the nostalgic, reject generic labels such as costume drama and social realism, and interweave themes of transgression, taboo and dream around their visions of the British landscape. Because of this, a new definition, that of anti-heritage rather than heritage, more aptly describes these contemporary British films. They constitute screenworks that are simultaneously deeply Romantic and contrarian.

So far this thesis has established that the contemporary British cinema under discussion opts for fact over myth, and for Williams' 'true history' over any distortion or propaganda. It has considered the modes of eerie, pastoral and heritage in relation to the landscapes of British cinema of the twenty-first century. In order to fully grasp the storytelling scale and ideological complexity of the films' stance, we now need to turn to their treatment of the epic mode.

Eerie-Pastoral-Heritage-**Epic**

CHAPTER SIX

EPIC (I): DEFEATED LANDSCAPES



*Red Riding 1974 (*Julian Jarrold, 2009)

Contextualising the Epic

In previous chapters it has been concluded that the makers of the contemporary British films under discussion occupy an apparently contradictory aesthetic position: they purport to reject the mythic storytelling tradition, and at the same time refashion it for their own purposes. This aesthetic stance, which espouses simultaneously that of rebel and keeper of the flame, is characterised by an ambivalence towards pre-existing stylistic modes such as eerie, pastoral and heritage, and might be defined as a fusion of creativity with subversion. So far this thesis has discussed the films' aesthetic in terms of its relationship with these modes of eerie,

pastoral and heritage. It have also argued for the films' ideological complexity as exemplified by the cross-pollination of ideas and styles across certain British films of the new century.

With regard to this aesthetic stance, this chapter and the next will consider how the mythic storytelling tradition is appropriated and subverted by these contemporary British films in relation to the epic mode. This chapter will focus on the *Red Riding* Trilogy, broadcast on Channel 4 in 2009, which comprises the three feature-length works *Red Riding 1974* (Julian Jarrold), *Red Riding 1980* (James Marsh) and *Red Riding 1983* (Anand Tucker). Although the trilogy was first shown on television in the UK, they were released theatrically as three feature films in the US in 2010, so in the context of this study I am considering them as feature films. After this chapter's analysis of the *Red Riding* Trilogy, the next chapter will analyse Paddy Considine's 2011 film *Tyrannosaur* in relation to the epic mode. These four films have been chosen because they not only engage through their landscapes with the idea, as set out in the Introduction, of the pestilence in the ditch, but also because they are exceptional in contemporary British cinema in their handling, and subversion, of the epic storytelling mode. My analysis of this utilisation of the epic mode in these films will concern itself with how, in framing questions relating to chivalry, masculinity and space in a contemporary context, they redefine our notions of the epic, and touch on concerns of national history and identity.

In considering the epic mode, these chapters use a hitherto neglected idea in relation to British films. The use of the concept of epic in Film Studies usually refers to long, historical or fantasy films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) or the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001-3). It is important to establish that the contemporary British films which I will discuss represent a different form of epic. In order to assess how these films achieve their subversion and renewal of the epic mode, it will be first be constructive to establish what we understand by the original concept of epic.

Gilbert Highet prefaces his survey *The Classical Tradition* by describing it as 'an outline of the chief ways in which Greek and Latin influence has moulded the literatures of western Europe and America.' (2015: lx) It serves as an introduction not only to literary epics such as Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but to the concept of epic. For Highet:

> An epic is made by a single poet … who relates one great heroic adventure in detail, connecting it with as much historical, geographical and spiritual background as will make it something much more deeply significant than any isolated incident, however remarkable, and causing it to embody a profound moral truth. (2015: 24)

Highet establishes the elements whose presence is required for a work to constitute an epic. These are: a narrator who relates the story, which must concern a single adventure that is noble ('heroic'), possessed of scale ('great') and set in the context of literal and figurative backgrounds that in turn confer meaning upon it. Additionally, there must be depth to this meaning for the epic to attain its goal, which is to 'embody a profound moral truth'. What is most relevant in Highet's definition to the films under discussion is the emphasis he places upon profundity: the adventure must not only be significant, but 'deeply' so, while the moral, or conclusion, has to be felt to be 'profound'. The role of profundity is reiterated in Highet's discussion of Milton's treatment of the mode: 'The epic, like the symphony, addresses all the spirit of man.' (2015: 161) So the quintessential prerequisite of the epic, which is applied to the films under discussion in this chapter and the next, must be that, above all else, it resonates. It must reach beyond, be symphonic, universal, ineffable.

Other scholarly approaches stress the social role of the epic mode. For Paul Merchant in his analysis of the literary epic:

> The double relation of epic, to history on the one hand and to everyday reality on the other, emphasises clearly two of its most original functions. It was a chronicle … a vital record of custom and tradition, and at the same time a story-book for general entertainment. The latter aspect of epic, its value simply as a story, needs no elaboration; but epic itself may have originated in the need for an established history. (1971: 1)

Merchant builds on Highet's point, that the epic poet's narrative must connect with historical, geographical and spiritual background, by proposing that the epic's role in society is a dual one, both as story-book entertainment and 'vital record of custom and tradition'. The concepts of custom and tradition introduce the idea of epic as being a reflection of its times, establishing a sense of a contemporaneous audience whom the poet addresses. In his work tracing the influence of the epic tradition upon modern cinema, Derek Elley articulates Merchant's point as follows: 'The literary epic was chiefly designed to entertain in a morally uplifting and instructive manner, by trading on the fears and ignorance of its audience.' (1984: 1) The phrase 'morally uplifting' links to Highet's view that the epic should possess a moral dimension, while Elley's inclusion of the elements of entertainment and instruction relates to Merchant's acknowledgment of its dual function as both story and history. Elley's analysis also underlines the role of a live audience, one whose 'fears and ignorance' the epic actively exploits. These points can be applied to an inherent function of all storytelling, the manipulation of listeners by their narrator. Further argument can be made for the importance of the location of epic in chronological terms, in that Elley stirs in the implication that its audience exists in a past more primitive or less enlightened than we perceive our own to be. In contrast to Highet's alignment of the epic with lofty ideals, Elley grounds it in flawed humanity. Both are relevant to the contemporary British films under discussion. What binds

these scholarly approaches is that they remain true to a central tenet, that of the epic's universality.

For Elley, an aspect of this is the epic's relationship with, and transcendence of, time itself: 'It is clear … that one of the purposes of epic literature is to present a national or religious identity in times of change. It is the peculiar ability of the epic to derive its basis from very real events but to transmute the ingredients into a timeless form.' (1984: 10) So we have the 'very real events' suggested by Highet and Merchant as the foundation of an epic, to which Elley adds that what is crucial in defining the epic is the alchemical process whereby the base material of a chronicle is transmuted into something universal, 'a timeless form'. What can be taken from this is that an epic must be simultaneously of its time, chronicling and reflecting 'times of change', and timeless. This emphasis on the epic's relationship to time is further echoed by Highet's claim that epic poets succeeded 'by using the multiple radiance of the classical past to deepen the bright single light of the present, and thus … illuminating the whole majestic spectacle of man's destiny.' (2015: 161) It will be addressed how these ideas of the past's relationship to the present, and of time's potential to cast revelatory light, provide an aspect of the epic mode which is handled with innovation by the films under discussion.

In terms of style and content, narrative poems from antiquity concerning the feats of heroes such as Achilles or Beowulf might appear far removed from contemporary British cinema. However, as discussed in the Introduction, the argument of Patrick Kavanagh's poem 'Epic' is that a 'local row' between quarrelling Irish farmers in the mid-twentieth century should be accorded Homeric status. Similarly, it can be argued that a kinship exists across time between the narratives of the classical poets and certain contemporary British screen narratives. Epics separated by thousands of years find common ground in their handling of theme and character, specifically in the area of their storytellers' bias towards defeat over

success. This point is crystallised by Highet, who cites as an example 'the dying trumpet of Roland' from the eleventh-century epic poem *The Song of Roland*: 'Heroic poetry seldom describes successes, unless against fearful odds. It prefers to tell of the defeat which makes the brave man even braver and rounds off his life.' (2015: 27-8) So for Highet the epic poem favours a tale of defeat, and of defeated characters.

By extension, the connection can be made between, for example, the characters of Beowulf and *Tyrannosaur*'s Joseph (Peter Mullan), which the next chapter will develop, in that both narratives concern defeated men. Moreover, the social background of *Tyrannosaur*, and of other contemporary British films in this study, is often one characterised by defeat. This is reflected in the films' locales which, appropriately, identify as defeated landscapes. The films predominantly focus on marginalised characters for whom money is not in abundance, a condition which reflects the filmmakers' project, in an echo of Williams as discussed previously, to depict a true history of British society. As such, by reflecting life and society in a state of flux, the films can be said to fulfil one of the purposes of the epic, which Elley stipulates as that they 'present a national or religious identity in times of change' (1984: 10). However, at the same time, far from illuminating what Highet calls 'the whole majestic spectacle of man's destiny', if these films have a vision of 'man's destiny' it is one that appears neither majestic nor spectacular. Instead, the vision of works such as *Dead Man's Shoes*, the *Red Riding* Trilogy, *Kill List*, *Tyrannosaur* and *Catch Me Daddy* might more aptly be described as paranoid and melancholy. A close analysis of the films in this chapter and the next will show how they reconcile these apparent opposites. They are indeed concerned with questions of man's destiny, and they do address 'all the spirit of man'. As such it will be shown that they qualify as epics, while also pushing to redefine the term.

This study of the films is divided into five sections: in the first two sections, Return to the Land of the Dead and Sad Sweet Dreamer, I consider *Red Riding 1974*. In the second two

sections, A Bad Angel on a Mistaken Journey and Void of Humanity, I consider *Red Riding 1980*. In the final section, To Us All and to the North, I consider *Red Riding 1983*. Then the next chapter, centring upon an analysis of *Tyrannosaur,* will explore how the trappings of epic survive and mutate in a film set against a contemporary backdrop of urban deprivation. Before moving to an analysis of the films, it will be useful to return to Merchant's notion of the epic as needing to fulfil two original functions. These functions are of chronicle and story-book, relating to history and to everyday reality, and Merchant's notion is fruitful when applied to the films of this study. *Wuthering Heights*, *A Field in England* and *The Selfish Giant* differ superficially in their aesthetic approaches but, despite being set in locales as various as, respectively, a farming community on the North York Moors of the nineteenth century, the English Civil War of the seventeenth century and contemporary post-industrial West Yorkshire, in that they focus on specific ways of life all broadly identify as chronicles of 'custom and tradition'. All three films can be said to manifest a strongly developed sense of history while at the same time they show a preoccupation with the 'everyday reality' of the authentic challenges which their characters face and undergo. In this they are utilising the epic mode. Merchant identifies the epic mode as the intersection of storytelling, history and reality. Alongside this, he points to another aspect which relates to the films:

> Finally, there is one quality inherent in our use of the word 'epic' that should be discussed. It is implicit whenever we speak of an 'epic journey' or an 'epic struggle' … these usages all point to an underlying conception characteristic of epic – the notion of 'scale', 'mass', 'weight' … While the epic need not necessarily be long … it must be large in scale, it must have 'epic proportions'. (1971: 4)

This emphasis on ideas of scale, and on a journey or struggle against a massive backdrop, might initially suggest little overlap between classical epics and the above-mentioned examples of *Wuthering Heights, A Field in England* and *The Selfish Giant*. The feral figures,

both human and animal, of Arnold's foggy landscapes, the bickering conflict between Wheatley's Roundhead soldiers, or the ominous silence of Barnard's giant electricity pylons, can be described as contributing to an intensity of cinematic experience, but does this intensity of imagery equate to being possessed of epic proportions?

This thesis argues that it does and moreover that, in their treatment of landscape, the contemporary British films of this study possess the requisite largeness of scale to qualify as epics. They may concern themselves with marginalised characters embroiled in what might be perceived as 'local rows' across a variety of regions of Britain, but they chronicle epic journeys, epic struggles and are of epic proportions. As we shall see, the *Red Riding* Trilogy and *Tyrannosaur* are modern narratives that may not contain heroes of the fame of Achilles and Beowulf, and their settings and landscapes may not possess the grandeur or the renown of Rome or Christendom, yet they are preoccupied with heroes and civilisations nonetheless.

Return to the Land of the Dead

'This nation's in fucking chaos.' These words are spoken two-thirds of the way through *Red Riding 1974* by corrupt property magnate John Dawson (Sean Bean) to cocky young journalist Eddie Dunford (Andrew Garfield), in an avuncular yet sinister chat that takes place inside the older man's white sports car as outside torrential rain lashes down. It is the first film of the *Red Riding* Trilogy but, in its triangulation of the personal, the political and the profane, Dawson's phrase typifies the tone of these dark, uncompromising screenworks. Additionally it crystallises the paradox at their heart, because Dawson's deceptively casual words represent both the character's superficial acknowledgment of the persistent social problems regarding crime and poverty to which he himself has contributed, and a kind of existential shrug about, and implicit justification for, his continuing acts of ruthless self-preservation and capitalist expansionism. These five words afford an entry-point into the

trilogy's maze of moral darkness, while even the location of the scene, the interior of an expensive car buffeted by a northern industrial city's elemental weather raging on the exterior, reflects the symbiotic relationship between material wealth and hostile environment, between vulnerability and violence, which the films explore and map.

The setting of the films of the *Red Riding* Trilogy is the Yorkshire of the 1970s and 1980s, whose bleak landscape and patriarchal society form the backdrop to a panoramic narrative which inserts fictional characters into the recreation of non-fictional events. The most dramatic of these is the real-life hunt for Peter Sutcliffe, known as the Yorkshire Ripper, who was finally apprehended in 1981 and convicted for the murders of thirteen women and the attempted murders of seven others. The films' mood of psychosis and paranoia renders this Yorkshire a shifting space, literally and figuratively, described by Fisher as 'the Red Riding's North, an inverted world in which evil enjoys carnivalesque licence.' (2014: 85) Fisher's alignment of place with morality sums up the aesthetic project of the trilogy, which is to draw a map of a terrible space and in so doing to fulfil two of the original functions of the epic as defined by Merchant: it provides chronicle and story-book. The trilogy functions both as a realistic examination of local lives impacted by a decade of unexplained disappearances, and as a nightmarish fantasy of a society wherein corruption, depravity and murder not only flourish but appear to be celebrated.

The three films are adapted by screenwriter Tony Grisoni from the quartet of novels by David Peace, literary works which Fisher calls 'acts of exorcism and excavation of the near-past, a bloody riposte to I Love The 1970s clipshow nostalgia.' (2014: 80) Fisher's rejection of nostalgia links to my discussion in previous chapters of Williams' attitude to the falsification of the past, and of the relation of this idea to notions of eerie, pastoral and heritage. The language used by Fisher to conjure up Peace's novels suggests that they triangulate the supernatural, the physical and the temporal. In the screen adaptations, this particular

conjunction not only survives the translation from page to screen but imbues the *Red Riding* Trilogy with an exceptional power to intoxicate and unsettle. Fisher describes Peace's quartet of novels as 'brutal and unrelenting fictions that possess an apocalyptic lyricism' (2014: 80) and to this already potent combination of the poetic and the abysmal the films add an eerie, existential sense of space. As shall be seen during this chapter, this sense of space, of social breadth, is central to what qualifies the films as epic. There is a vertiginous despair to the onscreen procession of outwardly bland societal spaces such as newspaper offices, police interview rooms, terraced houses and members' clubs which, coupled with the frequently despicable behaviour of the characters inhabiting them, transforms the films themselves into arenas of outright moral suffocation. Peace's novels are likened by Fisher to 'howls of agony and calls for retribution, divine or otherwise' (2014: 80) emphasising their status as metaphysical works. Upon these foundations, as much abstract as concrete, the screen adaptations build what Nick James calls 'visceral, fragmentary, impressionist-*noir* responses way beyond what we're used to from British crime cinema.' (2009: 30)

James' phrase points to the coexistence within the trilogy of different storytelling modes, in particular those of genre and non-fiction, in which respect the aesthetic of the trilogy recalls that of Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* as discussed in Chapter Four. As with Arnold's work, here the technique of filming one genre, a period drama, in the style of another, documentary, has a disorientating effect upon the viewer. In the case of the *Red Riding* Trilogy, as James implies, the aesthetic imperative for Peace, Grisoni and the filmmakers is that the outward trappings of the crime thriller genre, in which a detective figure carries out an investigation, serve to house an inner procedural. This uses true history, that is a non-fictional time and place, with the objective of analysing the state of the nation's soul. The onscreen world of the trilogy is one where, for James, 'the spoor of cock-up, cover-up, corruption, abuse, shootings and suicide leads everywhere and nowhere.' (2009: 30) This

idea of being on the trail of something that leads you in circles is lent force by the fiction being spliced with true events: 'these vile coppers, scarified dreamers and drained women remind you that this nightmare was once a real one.' (ibid.: 33) Thus, as we shall see in the subsequent analyses of the films, the trilogy manifests as a speculative chronicle of a time in the life of society in Britain's north, and as such can be defined as an authentic epic built upon true history. Yet its fixation with dark spaces, both literal and figurative, results in a blurring of the boundaries of what we consider to be epic, and so argues for a redefinition of the term.

Moral and physical darkness is established at the beginning of *Red Riding 1974* (hereafter *1974*) as we see a journalist in his twenties, Eddie Dunford (Garfield), drive from London into his native Yorkshire. Images of clouds and of rain on tarmac are accompanied by the sound of thunder, a pathetic fallacy foreshadowing the storm of events to follow in the narrative. Structurally the film's opening is balanced by its ending, when along the same bleak stretch of road Eddie drives away from the hornet's nest of crime and police corruption that he has knowingly stirred up, before he loses control and, it is implied, dies by crashing into a police cordon in place to prevent his escape. Not for the last time in the trilogy, the north is represented as, existentially, a place you can never leave.

Regarding the landscape of the novels and of their screen adaptations, Fisher concludes: 'In the end, everything – narrative, intelligibility – succumbs to total murk … at a certain point, it is unclear as to whether we have crossed over into the land of the dead.' (2014: 81) This space, the land of the dead, is familiar from my consideration in Chapter One of the utilisation of the mode of eerie in contemporary British cinema. Fisher describes : 'the eerie power of landscape … the ways in which physical spaces condition perception, and … the ways in which particular terrains are stained by traumatic events.' (2016: 97) In its pairings of space/perception, and terrain/trauma, Fisher's description speaks directly to the hostile and

brooding screen landscapes of the *Red Riding* Trilogy, which are eerie because 'stained' by systemic corruption and the Ripper's violence, and also because the spaces contain unexpected absences and presences. Places intended for public congregation such as pubs, clubs and offices turn out to be either sparsely populated or empty, whereas a deserted zone such as a night-time alleyway or a road across moorland proves to be occupied, by the police informant BJ (Robert Sheehan) loitering in it, or by Eddie's lone car traversing it.



1974: empty pubs

This eerieness of space integrates with the films' overarching moral penumbra to immerse the viewer in what Fisher calls such 'total murk' that we lose clarity, to the extent that we no longer know whether or not we have 'crossed over'. In other words, whether we are living or dead. This land of the dead, as discussed previously in this thesis, is the space in which all the contemporary British film narratives of this study unfold, but of the *Red Riding* Trilogy it is quintessentially so. Here, not only space but light is interzonal: roads, underpasses, car parks, construction sites, headlights at night, an interrogator's lamp in a police dungeon, all are possessed of an existential chiaroscuro. In the scope of its existential, and societal, elements, the trilogy becomes not only eerie but epic as well. If the 'particular terrains' criss-crossed by Eddie, and by his successors in the later parts of the trilogy, constitute a land of the dead, it is unsurprising that his quest should end in his own death. The implication from the beginning

is that by his initial act of returning to the 'inverted world' of the north, Eddie has already crossed over.

The narrative of *1974* follows Eddie's investigation, firstly on behalf of his employer the Yorkshire Post and then gradually as part of a misguided personal mission to uncover the truth, into the disappearance of 10-year old local girl Clare Kemplay. This journey takes him into a nexus of criminality in which several areas of the so-called establishment overlap. As Fisher says, 'the police are routinely corrupt, journalists are venal and co-optable, and the wealthy are vampiric exploiters.' (2014: 80) As other children are revealed to have gone missing and a body is found at a construction site, Eddie realises that press, police and big business are colluding in a cover-up in order to protect and satisfy their own appetites, financial and sexual, in a conspiracy of tainted male authority figures. The morally compromised characters encountered by Eddie on his quest through this northern underworld include John Dawson (Bean), the empire-building industrialist at whose gleaming new-build home, ironically named Shangri-La, ostentatious parties are held for those in the inner circle, while in secret acts of depravity are carried out. The priest Laws (Peter Mullan) appears to comfort the bereaved and vulnerable but is revealed by the last film in the trilogy to be entirely a false shepherd. Corrupt male police figures include Bill Molloy (Warren Clarke) and Bob Craven (Sean Harris), the latter of whom is the psychotic enforcer of the unofficial death squad within the police. This squad tortures and terminates suspects and for it other fatalities, such as the missing children, are collateral damage. Other characters include the hustler, informant and survivor BJ (Sheehan) and Paula Garland (Rebecca Hall), the mother of another missing girl, one of Dawson's casual lovers and the troubled female with whom Eddie, a shop-soiled knight errant, becomes romantically involved.

Eddie's status as a relative innocent in the corrupt universe of the trilogy is consistent with its wider theme of the extinction of innocence, as evidenced by the exploitation and murder of

children. As Eddie not only refuses to join but actively investigates the patriarchal cartel at the heart of this netherworld, he must pay the price by being sacrificed. First he is brutally beaten by the police and then, it is implied, executed as he attempts to escape. Ultimately, what is the viewer to take from the coruscating experience of watching *1974*? Here a reading of the trilogy as an epic, and in particular as a contemporary manifestation of a northern epic such as the mediaeval Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, helps us fashion a response to its relentlessly dark vision of humanity. Highet makes the distinction that the story of *Beowulf* inhabits a space associated not with light but with darkness: 'Compared with Homer, Beowulf's adventures take place, not in the morning light of civilisation, but in the twilight gloom of that huge, lonely, anti-human world, the forest primeval …' (2015: 23-4) Echoing this, for Merchant darkness inflects the narrative itself: '… in *Beowulf* darkness provides one of the poem's main tensions, and pessimism and a sense of doom are its prevailing moods. The hero is engaged in a struggle with the powers of darkness, a struggle which must end in defeat and decay, but his heroism and later reputation depend upon his conduct of the struggle.' (1971: 20)

This thesis takes these two descriptions of the world of *Beowulf*, and of the hero's role within it, and applies them to *1974*, and indeed to the other two films of the *Red Riding* Trilogy. The world of the trilogy has a kinship with Highet's 'forest primeval' in that it presents a physical and moral universe that feels lonely, anti-human and primitive. Linking to Merchant's account of *Beowulf*, the three films are suffused with darkness, pessimism and a sense of doom. Eddie's struggle with the powers of darkness, as represented by Dawson, Laws, Craven and others, ends in defeat and decay but, crucially, his conduct of this struggle is enough to ensure his later reputation. What happened to Eddie Dunford is a recurring question and plot-point of the second and third films which chronologically take place, respectively, six and nine years after the events of *1974*. So Eddie's reputation, how he

conducted himself in the struggle, is shown to be of consequence. These parallels between the worlds of *Beowulf* and the trilogy suggest two conclusions. Firstly, despite losing a struggle with the powers of darkness, Eddie acts with heroism. His defeat is 'the defeat which makes the brave man even braver and rounds off his life' (2015: 27-8) and so, perhaps, all was not in vain. Secondly, the scale and nature of Eddie's struggle render it of epic proportions and so, strangely and finally, it can be read as an epic.

Sad Sweet Dreamer

Steven Kohm and Pauline Greenhill offer a reading of the *Red Riding* Trilogy as a triangulation of environmental concerns, criminology and the fairytale 'Little Red Riding Hood'. According to them: 'The Trilogy offers a reflection upon violence, pedophilia, serial killing, as well as police, governmental, and corporate corruption and brutality.' (2013: 365) This viewing of the films in the context of the transgression of boundaries within a societal framework fulfils Merchant's stipulation, as discussed at the opening of this chapter, that the epic provides a 'vital record of custom and tradition' and an 'established history'. Kohm and Greenhill further observe that:

> The films simultaneously (re)create, reflect, and challenge ideas about criminality and appropriate responses from society and the justice system. Indeed, these movies question the criminal justice system's ability to adequately deal with the intergenerational and deeply rooted forms of crimes against children and their effects on entire communities. (2013: 365)

Kohm and Greenhill pinpoint that what distinguishes the trilogy is its engagement with social questions, achieved by probing the problematic relationship between the justice system, the community and crimes against children. What I take from this is that it mounts a convincing argument as to why the films inhabit, aesthetically speaking, a land of the dead. In their

preoccupation with social inequality, the three films function as a lament for the exploited, forgotten and marginalised. As such another of their themes, alongside the death of innocence, is neglect and its legacy. In the *Red Riding* Trilogy, the theme of violence is treated as not merely being located in the years 1974, 1980 and 1983, when the action takes place. Instead, as implied by Kohm and Greenhill's use of the phrases 'intergenerational', 'deeply rooted' and 'entire communities', it is seen as the consequence of decades of abuse that has never been adequately dealt with by the criminal justice system. The recurrence of violent events across time links with the idea, central to this thesis, that one of the effects of contemporary British films' distinctive fusion of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic in the context of landscape is that they exist outside of time. It further links with the idea that the epic needs to be both of its time, and timeless.

For Kohm and Greenhill, in the *Red Riding* Trilogy this results in a unity of theme and aesthetic: 'The literal darkness stands in for the pall of corruption and menace that hangs over the region. Politicians, police, and hard-boiled journalists grapple with the dark truth of child abuse, corruption, and murder, yet only seem intent on further obscuring the truth, never revealing it to the bright daylight.' (2013: 368) This articulates how the films straddle both the previously discussed worlds, of chronicle and story-book, of non-fiction and fiction. Kohm and Greenhill suggest the trilogy's subject matter is society's failure to safeguard its children, viewed through the prism of a narrative located specifically in the region of the north. It is arguable that the films' paradoxical relationship with 'dark truth' - something that characters at once grapple with and are intent on 'further obscuring' - takes on tragic, and epic, dimensions. An analysis of the following sequence from *1974* offers an illustration of this paradox, and shows how the 'pall of corruption and menace' is realised onscreen.

The scene in question is the climactic party held at night-time at Dawson's house, Shangri-La, for the hypocritical great and good of the community. It occurs ten minutes before the end

of the narrative of *1974* and in plot terms functions as both set-piece and reprise. It brings together characters and story strands from the preceding eighty minutes to reinforce the theme that the world in which the film exists is one where 'evil enjoys carnivalesque licence' (Fisher, 2014: 85). In this way it demonstrates the ultimate powerlessness of the protagonist Eddie, and by extension the viewer, against the forces of darkness. Key to the sequence is its utilisation of music: the action is overlaid by the contemporaneous pop hit 'Sad Sweet Dreamer' by Sweet Sensation. It is a track we assume to be playing at the party but which could equally be the soundtrack inside Eddie's head, such is the permanent state of fever dream which he has attained by this stage of his doomed investigation. The track's dream-like atmosphere and falsetto soul harmonies are a highly effective aesthetic choice in that they provide acute ironic counterpoint of, on the one hand, the dogged but deluded Eddie, the dreamer of the title who subsequent to this scene will be forcibly disillusioned by a brutal beating at the hands of the police death squad. On the other, we see the reality and scale of the corruption and collusion of so-called pillars of society such as Dawson, Laws and Molloy.

Immediately prior to the scene and as a kind of prologue, we see Eddie driving as, outside his car, rain buckets down, torrential as ever in the universe of the trilogy. He is singing along to Johnny Bristol's 'Hang On In There Baby', another song whose title and achingly romantic mood represent a carefully positioned ironic counterpoint to the actual content of the narrative. Eddie is smiling blissfully in anticipation of seeing Paula and with her escaping the north, an anticipation that is not destined to be fulfilled. Paula is not at her house but he finds an invitation to Dawson's party at Shangri-La, sweeps it up and leaves. Prologue over, now the sequence, or set-piece, begins in earnest as in a wide shot from inside Dawson's gates Eddie proffers the invitation and is waived through by attendants. In a continuing developing shot he approaches from the back of frame towards the camera, party guests mingling on either side, illuminated from above by the romantic glow of fairy lights suspended in a

canopy above the entryway to Dawson's house. The tasteful low lighting, noticeable in every space of the party, is a manifestation of the trilogy's overall theme of respectability being a façade, behind which the reality is a carnival of evil. Like the hushed falsetto soul music, the fairy lights function as a continuation of the film's motif of innocence, which in the world of *1974* is shown to have no currency, but rather is something fragile to be undermined or destroyed.

The same developing shot now pans with, and follows behind, Eddie as he walks inside and through the lower level of the house, passing familiar faces such as Hadley (John Henshaw), his boss at the Yorkshire Post, in private discussion with the policeman Molloy, presumably plotting something to Eddie's disadvantage. We then cut to a high-angle overhead shot of the white-painted, white-carpeted wooden stairs up which Eddie climbs to a mezzanine level in the house which is full of guests and festooned with more fairy lights. From the décor, music and ambience, we as viewers cannot escape the uneasy sensation that it looks like a great party, if you're an insider; but Eddie is on the outside, looking in. This ambivalence, between the visual celebration of material wealth and the moral price paid for its maintenance, is what holds us fascinated in this sequence. It is undeniably pleasant to be at this party, but at the same time we sense that Eddie, who is what passes for our moral compass in the underworld of *1974*, is about to become irretrievably lost, and therefore so will we.

In the same developing shot, from the back of frame Dawson now descends more stairs leading from an upper level, the modernist erotic painting of a nude on the staircase wall behind him a not-so-discreet nod to the sexual licence encouraged in Shangri-La. Moving forwards into a medium two-shot on the mezzanine level of the house, he greets his guest in avuncular tones: 'Eddie lad, some people I'd like you to meet, son.' The subtext is unmistakeable, however. Dawson has already made it clear to Eddie, in the meeting between the two of them in his sports car, that he either work with him, or back off entirely. Now he is

merely tolerating his unexpected appearance at his party, and directing him somewhere he cannot make a scene.

At this point, were we ever under the illusion that the narrative would end well for Eddie, we are left in no doubt by his response to Dawson: 'I'm not interested in your filthy little world, I just want to see Paula.' Eddie makes the mistake of directly asking for truth, an approach which we know to be laudable, but futile. Dawson mutters that Paula is 'long gone', two syllables that are sinister even by the standards of the 'total murk' of the screen world of the *Red Riding* Trilogy, and to let it go, before walking out of frame with intent. Eddie moves forward, followed in the same continuing shot by the camera positioned behind him, along the mezzanine level towards what appears a grotto of pure light (Fig. 1). This is revealed to be a kind of inner sanctum of the party, where he encounters Dawson's victimised and unstable wife (Cathryn Bradshaw) who babbles about the pattern in the carpet. This is a clue to the missing children that will be revisited in the subsequent films of the trilogy. Then burly attendants, presumably summoned by Dawson, step into frame and seize hold of Eddie to eject him from the premises.



Fig. 1

What happens next underlines the aesthetic sophistication of the sequence. Instead of following what happens to Eddie, as we might expect, we now cut back to a wide shot of the

party, positioned statically behind the guests arrayed on the mezzanine level as they look out of the vast windows at the spectacle of fireworks exploding in the night sky. Our eye is drawn to the distance, to this repetition of the motif of light. Like the fairy lights, these should symbolise hope and romance but by now we recognise them, in the context of the trilogy, as signifiers of the opposite. Yet in the foreground of this wide shot, barely noticeable at first, two figures stand in quiet conclave, Dawson and Molloy. We cannot hear what they are discussing but assuredly a decision is being made regarding the fate of Eddie. While we as viewers contemplate with the guests what is intended by the host as the sumptuous climax to his party, the foregrounded figures remind us that in this exact moment reality, and not a carefully lit veneer, is happening elsewhere, off-camera. It is an aesthetic strategy analogous with that of the celebrated sixteenth-century painting 'The Fall of Icarus' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder: in both, the supposed hero of the narrative is shown in true perspective, dwarfed by other events. The climactic sequence at Shangri-La illustrates how *1974* subverts the epic mode. It presents us with a panoramic set-piece that possesses scale in how it draws together characters and story strands, but undermines this by a sense of the protagonist's insignificance in the face of overwhelming forces, and an atmosphere not of heroism, but of secrecy and dread.

It is at this point in the sequence that we cut from the façade to the reality, to the existential place to which the narrative has been leading, namely the final suppression and execution of Eddie by the forces of darkness. In a medium wide shot, outside the party flanked by the gateposts as when he arrived, Eddie is being beaten up by two policemen. One asks: 'Is he bleeding yet?' To which the other replies: 'He is now.' They then pick up the prone Eddie and hurl him towards the camera, whose position is revealed to be inside a police van. As the camera pulls back, the van doors are slammed, leaving us in darkness. Immediately after this bravura sequence, as an epilogue, we are plunged into an ocular and psychological nightmare.

In a series of jarring, hand-held shots, we see Eddie stripped naked, bleeding and screaming, being brutally beaten in the dungeon of the police death squad. After it, Eddie will confront Dawson in one final, vainglorious gesture at the Karachi Club, which will end in a bloodbath and constitute an unsolved mystery in the narratives of the subsequent films of the trilogy. After that, the film will end as Eddie loses control of his car, attempting to drive out of the north.

The party sequence exemplifies director Julian Jarrold's tonal control of *1974* in balancing shimmering surface and Stygian depths. It shows an ability to, on the one hand, harness imagery and themes redolent of fairytale, in terms of characterisation and *mise-en-scene* that contrast good with evil. On the other it unflinchingly, albeit implicitly, engages with 'the intergenerational and deeply rooted forms of crimes against children and their effects on entire communities.' (Kohm and Greenhill, 2013: 365) Metaphorically, what we are seeing in this sequence is the last flickering of a flame, personified by Eddie, before it is extinguished. To discover whether his struggle has any meaning, in the epic sense, it will be necessary for us to continue our journey through the land of the dead in the next film of the trilogy. Here we will find out whether, on the other side of the 'pall of corruption and menace', there is any light.

A Bad Angel, on a Mistaken Journey

The central film of the trilogy, *Red Riding 1980* (hereafter *1980*), revolves around the hunt for the Yorkshire Ripper, and the psychological damage it inflicts locally and nationally. This is established in the opening credits where the use of real-life archive footage blurs the lines between fiction and non-fiction, to create an atmosphere continuously poised between authenticity and folk memory. Superficially, *1980* is the most conventional and generically satisfying of the three films in terms of both style and story, as it constitutes a plot-driven

thriller with a twist at its end, led by a protagonist who is a detective on a mission to solve a case. Director James Marsh frames characters and action with a geometric precision that contrasts directly with the suffocating expressionism of *1974*, or with the bewildering imperative to tie up a multitude of plot strands in *1983*. But this sense of order and space in *1980* is an aesthetic contrivance to accentuate the fact that, in the north of the *Red Riding* Trilogy, intolerable levels of corruption have been internalised and normalised to such an extent that the evil of this 'inverted world' (Fisher, 2016: 85) is not explicit but implicit. So outwardly safe or neutral spaces like restaurants, hotel lobbies or car parks are presented by Marsh's camera and lighting as orderly. On a pre-cognitive level, however, they register as eerie or threatening because we infer the true nature of the transactions taking place in these spaces, and anticipate the moment when chaos breaks out from behind the mask of order.

An example of a highly effective aesthetic technique used by Marsh in *1980* to deepen this sense that dark truths lie behind these organised surfaces is the occasional irruption of the subjective point of view shot into the otherwise conventional coverage of a scene, so that a character either addresses, gesticulates at or looks into the camera. This technique is first deployed three minutes into the film when, during the opening credits, Assistant Chief Constable Bill Molloy (Warren Clarke) looks into the camera and says 'To me you're like a bad angel, on a mistaken journey.' He is conducting an imaginary conversation with the Ripper, whose identity at this stage is unknown, and the use of this to-camera device serves three functions relevant to the coming narrative. Firstly, it signals that the contained dramatic reality of the world of the trilogy is one that can be broken, whose borders shift, and thereby it prepares us as viewers to enter a liminal zone in both aesthetic and moral terms. This liminal zone and idea of the porousness of its borders were discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One, and the occupation of this same space by the *Red Riding* Trilogy marks it out as having an affinity, like the other films under discussion, with the pestilence in the ditch.

The second function served by the to-camera device is the vulnerability, bordering on neurosis, displayed by the usually abrasive Molloy in his intimacy with the camera, and by extension with us. This establishes a tension, which the rest of the film will exploit, between similar moments of subjective irrationality and the rationality of the bureaucratic spaces in which much of the action plays out. This aesthetic juxtaposition of illogic and reason contributes to the overall power of the film to disorient the viewer. Thirdly, on a thematic level Molloy's words apply not only to the Ripper, whose malign presence hovers over *1980*, but more widely to the trilogy as a whole. Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, is in terms of morality an evil entity, committing unspeakable acts. Therefore in terms of the films' theme of the destruction of innocence, as exemplified by the use of motifs relating to the mutilation of swans or children, which is a recurrent image system throughout the trilogy, his role can indeed be interpreted as that of a bad angel. However, the phrase also describes many of the characters in the trilogy, most of whom do evil work, whether deliberately or accidentally, and are all embarked upon a journey as mistaken as that taken by the Ripper himself. Ironically, Molloy's words even apply to the protagonist of *1980*, Peter Hunter (Paddy Considine).

Of all the characters across the *Red Riding* Trilogy, Peter Hunter is its closest approximation to a good angel, and to the traditional idea of an epic hero as outlined at the beginning of this chapter. The narrative of *1980* begins with Hunter being recruited from Manchester to West Yorkshire in order to head up the police hunt for the Ripper, but as the narrative proceeds it will dawn on us, and at the climax be confirmed, that he is being set up to fail by his own side. Hunter was previously involved in the investigation into the Karachi Club shootings six years earlier, but left the case due to his wife having a miscarriage - one of the many skilful internal echoes of *1980* is its juxtaposition of the ongoing miscarriage of justice with the real miscarriage of Hunter's wife. Now, Hunter is allocated a police team including trusted ally

John Nolan (Tony Pitts) and Helen Marshall (Maxine Peake), a colleague with whom he formerly had an affair. They must work alongside Bob Craven (Sean Harris), the psychotic death squad enforcer from *1974* who makes clear his hostility to Hunter and to his investigation. As the story progresses it intertwines two chief strands, the personal and the procedural: on the one hand the slow descent of a good but morally compromised man into an inferno, and on the other the hunt for and apprehension of the Ripper.

Like Eddie in the preceding film, and indeed the character of Richard who Considine also played in *Dead Man's Shoes*, Hunter is a vulnerable would-be white knight which circumstances draw into increasing derangement. He functions as the notional hero of an epic in observance with Merchant's suggestion that such a figure be 'engaged in a struggle with the powers of darkness, a struggle which must end in defeat and decay, but his heroism and later reputation depend upon his conduct of the struggle.' (1971: 20) What adds pathos and hubris to Hunter's decline, however, is that morally speaking he sets himself up higher than Eddie. Where the latter is cynical and opportunistic, Hunter is a happily married man who telephones his wife on a regular basis and conducts a professional police operation. The tragedy of Hunter, and what makes *1980* the darkest of the trilogy, is that he has further to fall. We believe, erroneously, that an upstanding hero like Hunter will lead us away from the terrible darkness in which we find ourselves at the end of*1974* and towards the light. Instead we and Hunter travel on a mistaken journey into even greater darkness. Like its predecessor,*1980* ends with the sacrifice of the protagonist, when Hunter is assassinated by the same corrupt cartel of police, politicians and journalists that we first encountered in *1974*. But while for Eddie we have anticipated that there will be a reckoning, because of his constant skirmishes with the powers of darkness, Hunter has, mostly, conducted himself with integrity. So his death carries a sickening force because it takes him, and us, by surprise.

The climax of *1980* demonstrates an impressive sleight of hand on the part of director James Marsh in that, narratively, we are first distracted from the Hunter plot, by the Ripper plot being moved into the foreground. It is then that, as the confessions of Peter Sutcliffe (Joseph Mawle) in a police interrogation room continue like an inadequately recited poem over shots of Hunter driving at night, we realise that the culmination of the Ripper plot has only served as a weird alleviation of the tension in the Hunter strand. This tension is now resolved in a fashion which facilitates horror, as we follow Hunter into the police dungeon, the site of the torture of many suspects including Eddie. Here our first shock is the sight of Bob Craven with a bullethole in his forehead, before the second, greater shock: Nolan, Hunter's supposed ally, is present, raises a pistol and shoots Hunter dead. Nolan is thus revealed to have been in league all along with the powers of darkness. They have decreed that Hunter's investigation has taken him too close to the truth behind the patriarchal conspiracy, and that he must be removed and simultaneously framed for the killing of the increasingly unstable Bob Craven. Appropriately, as an illustration of the trilogy's dark sense of itself, earlier in the film Craven has said to Hunter, sarcastically, of the investigation: 'It's getting dead murky, innit?'

Hunter's death pays off the slow-burning sense of dread which the film has been expertly building up, and retrospectively renders *1980* as not only a story about the hunt for the Ripper, but an epic foreshadowing of the hero's death. Hunter's struggle ends in defeat and decay, but it also subverts the definition of the epic as discussed previously in this chapter, in that his conduct of the struggle does not appear especially heroic. In this respect it qualifies more as anti-epic than as epic. The narrative sweep and moral and psychological complexity of the *Red Riding* Trilogy position it as a modern epic, lent poignancy by the nature of Hunter's struggle. In an echo of Gawain fighting the Green Knight in the fourteenth-century chivalric romance, the hero of this twenty-first century epic is tarnished, and the struggle is

unequal. However, in addition to this, the trilogy's depiction of landscape as a shifting space without borders moves its mode from epic towards anti-epic.

Void of Humanity

A key sequence in *1980* which precisely locates the hero within a societal context, and functions as a foreshadowing of his eventual fate, is Hunter's visit two-thirds of the way through the narrative to the outlying suburb of Fitzwilliam. Kohm and Greenhill emphasise that this is a locale simultaneously bland and terrifying:

> …here there is a sense of foreboding, inscribed on the landscape of dreary row houses that lie in the shadow of the iconic nuclear reactor's cooling towers, all hinting at lurking danger. The area initially appears void of humanity, save the odd child darting through muddy puddles while open fires burn in the background. (2013: 370)

As implied, the sequence distils the malevolent, troubling energy of the trilogy into one location, rendering it a kind of anti-space and underlining the sophistication of these screenworks in subverting notions of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic. Kohm and Greenhill's employment of words like 'dreary', 'shadow' and 'lurking' point to Fitzwilliam being suffused with menace. At the same time it is a space that appears 'void of humanity'. Absence, where a presence would be expected, imbues it with an eerie atmosphere. It is a post-industrial landscape, defined by the cooling towers which loom more desolately even than the pylons of the landscape of *The Selfish Giant*. While not identifiably urban it is far from pastoral, but instead an adulterated version of what might once have been pastoral: 'The physical setting is simultaneously familiar and foreboding … Its derelict playground is covered in junk; wrecked cars are dumped in what might otherwise be green space. Its working-class residents live in monotonous brick row houses or semi-detached dwellings.'

(2013: 371) The phrase ‘what might otherwise be green space’ points to Fitzwilliam’s ruined potential as somewhere we would once conceivably have associated with an idea of pastoral.

Kohm and Greenhill’s description of this location encapsulates the paradox of space not only in *1980* and the trilogy, but across the other contemporary British films under discussion. Their landscapes are all ‘simultaneously familiar and foreboding’ and ‘void of humanity’, begging the question: why are they depicted thus? This recurrent tension in contemporary British cinema between the familiar and the foreboding reflects the filmmakers’ preoccupation with, and triangulation of, sociology, space and story as a means of presenting their interpretations of what Williams calls a ‘true history’ (2016: 85). So in *1980* the sequence where Hunter arrives at the uncanny interzone of Fitzwilliam represents the impact of story (the hero enters the arena) upon the sociological (conventional society has abandoned this place) and the spatial (it is liminal, neither green nor industrial). Thematically, in an echo of Fisher’s description of the novels as ‘calls for retribution, divine or otherwise’ (2014: 80), Fitzwilliam functions as a vision of Hell. This is both in its sinister sense of dislocation and because, as will be revealed in *1983*, it is the films’ ultimate locus of evil, the place where the missing children are molested and killed in a hidden maze of underground cages. Symbolically, mythically and in epic terms, it represents the place where the hero must do battle. It equates tothe labyrinth in Greek mythology which Theseus enters to confront the Minotaur.

However, the antagonist throughout the *Red Riding* Trilogy is no single monster but shadowy, amorphous forces spearheaded by corrupt individuals, which makes the battle far from straightforward. Hunter arrives at Fitzwilliam in relative innocence, unaware of its true identity as the repository of atrocious folk memories, but rather following a lead in his role as investigator. Yet he is entering a space that is ‘stained by traumatic events.’ (2016: 97) Arguably his arrival activates forces lying dormant, and consequently what ensues is that the

physical space conditions Hunter's, and our, perception. This influencing of perception is illustrated by the sequence, which begins in an exterior wide shot of Hunter's car driving along the winding road in the foreground, towards the ominous cooling towers in the background. We cut to a moving shot from Hunter's point of view through the windscreen, wipers keeping off the ever-present northern rain, of the wet road as he approaches the looming towers. Then we cut to a close-up of raindrops on the car window with the towers a blur in the background. Next in a wide shot we see Hunter's car arrive in the back of frame, at the rear of a row of terraced houses. In the foreground a brazier burns on the right of frame, and a child sits on a low wall to the left of frame. The orange glow of the car sidelights, and of the brazier fires in both foreground and distant background, adds a subtle but unmistakeable suggestion of the infernal. In the same wide shot, the child now jumps off the wall and runs out of frame. The implication, which the rest of the sequence will bear out, is that the child is a scout, or informant, for the community of Fitzwilliam. A character leaving shot like this is consistent with the trope in the trilogy of people leaving frame in order to confer or conspire offscreen, contributing to the overall sense of paranoia and unseen forces.

We now cut to an exterior medium shot of the same back alley, the low red-brick wall in the left foreground and Hunter's car out of focus in the background. The same shot pulls focus to Hunter approaching, and pans left with him as he enters a gate to knock at the door of a house, which belongs to Reverend Laws. At this point an eerie element obtrudes for the first time, as the loud, desolate cry of a fox makes Hunter turn and look anxiously out of frame left. Elsewhere this thesis has considered the use of animal imagery by Andrea Arnold in *Red Road* and *Wuthering Heights*, and the deployment of it here is similarly powerful in its juxtaposition of human, animal and space to establish an eerie atmosphere. However, the context of this sequence makes the presence of a wild animal in Fitzwilliam not merely startling, but disturbing. We do not expect this presence, announced by the bark of a fox, in a

space that has been established as largely abandoned, so the effect of the sound is to further disorientate Hunter and the viewer. Added to this, we know that animals, like children, are preyed upon in the world of the *Red Riding* Trilogy. This is in keeping with its overarching theme of the extinction of innocence, so at the very least the fox signifies violence or even death. Next the sequence cuts to a lower angle wide shot from an empty space at the end of the row of houses, a puddle in the foreground reflecting the action above it, the fading daylight a reminder that this scene takes place at twilight, literally and metaphorically. The child from the wall, now wearing what looks like a mask, runs across frame right to left, Hunter walks out of the background towards the camera, the fox cries again and Hunter continues walking towards the camera.

By now we sense that this place is somehow at the heart of the mystery, and thus that what happens next in the sequence holds particular significance. The music surges to reach a crescendo, more electronic and discordant in quality than the orchestral score with which the sequence began. This happens underneath a montage of quick cuts comprising close-ups of children in the grass around the empty space, each wearing an animal mask and shooting a toy pistol at the camera, whose position represents both Hunter's and our point of view. This is an example of the irruption of the device of the subjective camera viewpoint in *1980* reminding us of our proximity to the abyss. On a deeper level, we feel that the children are taking aim at us, and the use of this device reinforces a sense of the unfamiliar and the hostile. Now comes the focal point of the sequence, as we cut back to a close-up of Hunter's face, looking disconcerted. He is positioned centre frame, the background out of focus, glancing jerkily to camera right and camera left. It is the defining image of the film: Hunter's dislocation, the hero facing defeat and decay (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2

This is followed by a brief, bravura montage of shots from Hunter's point of view of children, each wearing a different home-made mask, shooting at him. An example of the sophistication of the sequence is that one mask, in a possible echo of a crusader knight, has crosses for eye-holes, a reading of which is that it represents the desecration of the cross, and thus the inversion of morality in the trilogy. Marsh emphasises Hunter's and our disorientation by using whip-pans, jump cuts and moving Hunter rapidly in and out of focus. This creates a sensory, hallucinatory atmosphere which is the more effective for its contrast with the calm precision with which much of the rest of the film's scenes are framed. The sequence climaxes with, in the same close-up, Hunter deciding to leave and stepping backwards out of focus, into the background, in the direction of his car. The manner in which he does so reflects the uncanniness of the space: he moves awkwardly like a marionette, as if the film has been reversed, he is afraid of stepping on a mine or his action is part of a religious ritual. In a final wide shot, reflected in the puddle in the foreground, Hunter returns to his car at a run to escape this hostile place. The montage has delivered menace and thematic complexity, and lasted approximately ten seconds. The whole sequence hasserved its dual function: to take us inside a traumatised space and there, by showing the hero's alienation from it, foreshadowed his own death.

To Us All, and to the North

It has been established that one of the achievements of the *Red Riding* Trilogy, as articulated by Kohm and Greenhill, is that it 'connects social structural issues with violence against marginalized peoples and animals, and with destruction of habitations and habitat.' (2013: 371) Due to the scale of artistic ambition manifested by bringing together, on the one hand, social issues, violence and destruction and, on the other, ideas relating to existence and to home, the trilogy fulfils the criteria of an epic as outlined at the start of the chapter. It functions as both chronicle and storybook, and is demonstrably full of as much historical, geographical and spiritual background as will make the narrative 'something much more deeply significant than any isolated incident.' (2015: 24) With regard to this, the cumulative power of the devastating events depicted in the trilogy position it as a kind of dark fresco of the recent British past. Most importantly, as Kohm and Greenhill imply, its expansiveness, or epic quality, causes it to embody a profound moral truth: that the innocent are exploited by the venal. So, as Highet insists, the profundity and significance are there. Yet in another, vital sense the films differ from and transcend his stipulation that an epic should relate 'one great heroic adventure in detail.' (2015: 24) The scale and the detail are indeed there, but how is the adventure heroic? It appears problematic that the trilogy offers an adventure that is at best anti-heroic, and at worst downbeat, horrifying and bleak.

This transcendence of traditional notions pertaining to heroic conduct is further explored in the trilogy's concluding film, *Red Riding 1983* (hereafter *1983*). In *1974* and *1980* the stance of their respective heroes, Eddie Dunford and Peter Hunter, can broadly be characterised as that of moral crusaders, and they prove no match for the north. Indeed, it is arguable that both men's demise is due to their perception of themselves as being embarked upon a great heroic adventure, when in fact, as previously discussed, they are on mistaken journeys through a land of the dead. The journeys are mistaken because in their quests for truth these heroes

appoint themselves as representatives of moral goodness, when they are in a realm where no morality obtains, and so they are easily absorbed and annihilated by the forces of darkness. Ultimately, all three films can be classified as dramas of conscience but it is notable that, procedurally and spiritually, in *1983* it takes two decidedly tarnished, compromised heroes, who differ markedly from the protagonists of the preceding two films, to finally solve the case. Maurice Jobson (David Morrissey) and John Piggott (Mark Addy) are milder heroes than Eddie and Hunter, and this change from the intensity of the earlier films is both tonally refreshing and effective in guiding us towards the trilogy's denouement. Crucially, both men are more morally suspect than either Eddie or Hunter, because they are not outsiders but insiders, and are therefore themselves irradiated by the corruption of the ongoing conspiracy. Jobson, a police officer, has colluded in the past decade's cover-ups, and Piggott, a down-on-his-luck solicitor, is aware of his own father's involvement in what will be revealed as the Fitzwilliam paedophile ring. As a former victim tells him towards the end of the narrative: 'Your dad was the wolf's friend'. So the protagonists of *1983* are haunted men, not heroes but anti-heroes, weighed down by the guilt of knowing that atrocities were being carried out and having done little to intervene. Paradoxically, their moral fallibility and consequent humility equip them for victory, or what passes for it in the 'total murk' of the trilogy.

1983 is obliged to follow the simple necessity of having to tie up the many narrative strands established in the preceding films, and of condensing two of David Peace's original quartet of novels into one single feature-length screen story. In the end, while the film resolves the mystery of what has happened to the missing children, it functions best as a reprise of and meditation upon the themes and incidents established in the first two films of the trilogy. This sense of reprise is present in the opening scene of *1983*, a flashback to the reception of the wedding of the daughter of Bill Molloy (Warren Clarke), as a familiar cartel of corrupt northern white men, including Dawson (Sean Bean), Nolan (Tony Pitts) and Jobson himself,

raise a glass to their future success with the toast: 'To us all! And to the north!' *1983* concludes with the exposure and implied dismantling of the unofficial network of policemen, businessmen and journalists that has influenced society over the decade covered by the trilogy. Nonetheless their rallying cry, its combination of cordiality and irony chilling in that its bland bravado masks deeper acts of ruthlessness and immorality, hangs like a pall over the rest of the film.

The narrative of *1983* centres around the issue that, in spite of the Yorkshire Ripper having been apprehended at the conclusion of *1980*, children have continued to go missing. Embarked upon a search for the most recent missing child, Hazel Atkins, and prompted by their consciences relating to the degree of their own complicity in the conspiracy, Jobson and Piggott respectively investigate suspects Michael Myshkin (Daniel Mays) and Leonard Cole (Gerard Kearns). These have been framed and incarcerated by the police as part of the ongoing suppression of the wider truth. The two investigations intersect and culminate in Piggott's discovery at Fitzwilliam of a mine-shaft beneath the pigeon shed of Reverend Laws (Peter Mullan), which it transpires has served as a prison for the missing children and a killing zone for a paedophile and child-murdering ring. This has been led by Laws and included clients such as Dawson and Piggott's own father. It emerges that hustler BJ (Robert Sheehan) is a survivor of this ring, but when he returns to Fitzwilliam seeking revenge he is once more vulnerable to the emotional and psychological hold Laws has over him, and is only saved by Jobson intervening to shoot Laws dead. At the same moment, Piggott exits from the underground maze carrying Hazel Atkins, the missing girl, still alive. In this way, at the end of *1983* the cycle of defeat and decay is broken. Unlike the many disappeared of the *Red Riding* Trilogy comprising women, children, the corrupt like Dawson and Craven or the crusading like Eddie and Hunter, this time there are survivors in the form of Jobson, Piggott

and BJ. It is poignant and fitting that the trilogy closes with BJ, in contrast with the deaths of the protagonists of *1974* and *1980*, physically leaving the north behind.

In conclusion, it would be productive to examine the significance in *1983* of not a sequence, but a place, and how its role reflects the overarching aesthetic of the trilogy. Previously this thesis has discussed the idea of an edgelands, or liminal zone, in relation to the work of Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts. In the *Red Riding* Trilogy, Fitzwilliam can be seen to connote a definitive edgelands, being neither urban nor rural but rather an eerie space that manifests as both post-industrial and anti-pastoral. At the climax of *1983* the revelation is that what we have taken for mundane elements of the narrative, such as Laws' van, allotment and shed, each linked to the edgelands, are in fact tainted by their association with abduction, imprisonment and violent appetites. They are literally conduits to evil, to what Kohm and Greenhill call 'the dark truth of child abuse, corruption, and murder' (2013: 368) at the heart of the trilogy. The place beneath Laws' pigeon shed is physically marked by its history. As such, it recalls the discussion in Chapter Two of what Fisher describes as 'the ways in which particular terrains are stained by traumatic events' (2016: 97), and of what Macfarlane defines as a shadow-site: 'the relic trace of a path, earthwork, post hole or ditch, hidden often in plain view but apparent only under certain circumstances … lending revelatory shadows to the land.' (2012: 48) The truth lying under Fitzwilliam confers upon it the status of a shadow-site. The shed becomes a portal to the netherworld, a place resonant with the relic trace of human suffering, 'hidden often in plain view'. Throughout the trilogy Eddie, Hunter, Jobson and Piggott have visited it, but all failed to suspect it for what it is.

The shadows which this portal lends to the terrain under the circumstances, namely the ending of this emotionally harrowing trilogy, are made revelatory by the filmmakers' careful aesthetic integration of the twin elements of history and narrative storytelling . Historically, this site has physically and spiritually accumulated memory over time, and so functions as a

kind of storehouse of the souls who have died there in pain. Narratively, the questions asked by the labyrinthine plot of the trilogy are answered, to a certain extent, by the unmasking of diabolic figures such as Dawson, Laws and Craven.

The formal fluidity of the trilogy in utilising the conventions both of horror and of the procedural thriller, allied to its subversive treatment of the hero figure, prompts the conclusion that it at once embraces and redefines notions of the epic mode. This redefinition points to a new mode, that of anti-epic. This mode takes the epic elements which were established at the opening of this chapter such as chronicle, story-book and the hero's struggle, and locates them within a defeated, contemporary landscape. It is a post-industrial space of discord, which draws together eerie, anti-pastoral and anti-heritage. The result is a subversive aesthetic which, as the next chapter will explore, Paddy Considine's *Tyrannosaur* develops further.

Eerie-Pastoral-Heritage-**Epic**

CHAPTER SEVEN

EPIC (II): CAUTIOUS REDEMPTION



*Tyrannosaur (*Paddy Considine, 2011)

A British Anti-Epic

The opening of the previous chapter argued for a correlation between aspects of classical epics and of certain contemporary British films. In the narrative of the epic hero, I established the significance for Highet of the theme of defeat: 'Heroic poetry seldom describes successes, unless against fearful odds. It prefers to tell of the defeat which makes the brave man even braver and rounds off his life.' (2015: 27-8) In contemporary British cinema, the work which both absorbs and subverts the implications of this statement to the most rewarding extent is Paddy Considine's 2011 film *Tyrannosaur*. The film tells of a defeat against fearful odds by

its raging, anti-heroic protagonist Joseph (Peter Mullan), and simultaneously elicits our empathy and makes us question our allegiance to such a man. In this respect, as will be argued in this chapter, it qualifies as a cinematic version of a twenty-first-century epic poem. At the same time, however, it subverts ideas pertaining to the epic mode by redrawing the parameters of what constitutes success, defeat and bravery within a twenty-first-century context. It constitutes a landscape film, though its landscape is an intensely urban one. It also offers perhaps the most defeated landscape, and within it the most defeated characters, of the films under discussion in this thesis.

Set in a deprived area of an unspecified northern city, the plot of *Tyrannosaur* follows the intersection of the lives of three characters: Joseph (Mullan), Hannah (Olivia Colman) and her husband James (Eddie Marsan). Joseph attempts to navigate society and function on a daily, if not hourly, basis. He is a deeply flawed man, a widower prone to outbursts of rage, often but not always drink-induced. The first time we encounter him, he exits a pub and repeatedly kicks his own dog savagely, before carrying the dying animal home in his arms and tenderly holding its paw as it dies. *Tyrannosaur*'s opening oscillation between violence and sensitivity is continued in the combination of briskness and passion with which Joseph digs a hole the next morning in his scanty garden to bury his dog. It establishes a conflicted matrix of emotional responses on the viewer's behalf to the drama that unfolds, setting a tone which is by turns brutal and poetic. One reading of the film is that it is a portrait of a soul in torment, of an individual imprisoned by the limitations not only of themselves, but of their social environment. The film's exclusively urban settings of claustrophobic pubs, bedrooms, backyards and streets frame a world in which deprivation is an expected mode of existence, and imply that emotional growth, let alone escape, is impossible within such narrow social parameters. What makes *Tyrannosaur* aesthetically exciting, however, is what sets it apart from the social realism towards which this interpretation points: its mythic dimensions and

subversion of the epic mode. In this way, as well as offering a realistic tour of the brutal moments that make up Joseph's daily life, on a conceptual and existential level it reaches towards the ineffable.



Fig.1

In his survey of classical epics, Merchant states: 'The theme of *The Iliad* is the anger of one man, Achilles' (1971: 16). A contemporary echo of this can be seen in *Tyrannosaur* in that, thematically, it concerns itself with Joseph's rage (Fig.1) and its cost to himself and to others. Beyond this, the epic with which *Tyrannosaur* shares a specifically northern identity is *Beowulf*, the importance of whose dark atmosphere is acknowledged by Merchant: '… in *Beowulf* darkness provides one of the poems main tensions, and pessimism and a sense of doom are its prevailing moods.' (1971: 20) It was already considered in the previous chapter how the *Red Riding* Trilogy is located physically and spiritually in a world of darkness. This is due to its location in and identification with the north as a place, as well as to its aesthetic imperative of depicting human characters engulfed by what Highet terms 'twilight gloom'.

While located in the north, *Tyrannosaur* does not take the region as its theme to the same extent as *Red Riding* Trilogy. It does, however, share its preoccupation with characters on the margins of conventional society. Moreover, as its setting is contemporary, rather than the 1970s and 1980s, the critique it makes of society is consequently the more devastating. This

landscape of the north has barely altered from the godforsaken spaces of Fitzwilliam and the Karachi Club in the *Red Riding* Trilogy, suggesting that here, in the urban north of *Tyrannosaur,* time has simply stopped. The spaces in Considine's film feel abandoned, from the interior of Joseph's house, haunted by the absence of his dead wife, to the exteriors of pubs, shops and houses, empty of human passers-by. This representation of space implies the legacy of decades of social neglect. In this respect, like the Yorkshire of the *Red Riding* Trilogy, it is a defeated landscape, and the prevailing mood is correspondingly one of pessimism and doom as Merchant suggests. It is the same lonely, anti-human world as that articulated by Highet. In *Tyrannosaur,* however, what he describes as the 'forest primeval' of *Beowulf* has been replaced by, or mutated into, a modern post-industrial environment that is equally savage and hostile to humanity. Against this backdrop, Joseph in *Tyrannosaur* becomes a familiar figure out of myth. Like Achilles or Beowulf, he is a hero who stands 'against fearful odds'. However, any epic status this might confer upon the contemporary narrative is subverted in two ways. Firstly, unlike his heroic predecessors, Joseph is not a prince, but an underdog. Secondly, the backdrop against which he stands is the inverse of what we expect from an epic landscape. The broken nature of the urban landscape through which Joseph strides, in a manner that is simultaneously virile and powerless, is less recognisable as epic. Instead it would be more accurate to identify it as the opposite: anti-epic.

Caught in a Vice

From this it will be evident that *Tyrannosaur* is a complex work, of which a simplistic reading as either character study or social realism would be reductive. The rest of this chapter is divided into sections that analyse aspects of the film. This section will consider the role of social class in *Tyrannosaur*. The next, Man and Animal, will focus on the prominence the film gives to the theme of masculinity, with particular attention to its bravura use of animal

imagery, an element lending it an affinity with the work of Andrea Arnold as discussed in previous chapters. An Alternative Catechism will discuss the role of women in both the *Red Riding* Trilogy and *Tyrannosaur*, and analyse the subversive use of dialogue as a means of introducing notions of spirituality in Considine's film. The final section, Dispossession and Vacancy, will address the question of whether the landscape in which these anti-epics are located may constitute an anti-nation.

A brief synopsis of the film shows how easy it is to fall into the trap of interpreting it as a social realist text, which would be a misreading of its aesthetic sophistication. Joseph is a self-destructive individual who is not in control of his actions. He pinwheels between the wreckage of his past, where it is implied he beat his late wife, and the unstable present where he kills his own dog and threatens other people at the post office or in the pub. After being beaten up by the sons of the post office official in retribution for threatening their father, he seeks refuge in a charity shop. This is staffed by Hannah, a Christian who offers to pray for him but whose gesture he not only rejects but mocks. Joseph is bitterly judgemental about what he assumes is Hannah's comfortably well-off life, in an upmarket part of town with her husband James. We subsequently discover that, in reality, Hannah is trapped in an abusive relationship with James, who beats her regularly. When Hannah comes to Joseph's house after an especially brutal beating by James, Joseph reluctantly lets her stay. The two make an unusual couple as Hannah joins Joseph at the pub after the funeral of his oldest friend. A twist awaits in the narrative in that, when Joseph goes to Hannah's house, he finds the corpse of James, revealing that after the last beating Hannah killed her husband in self-defence. The film concludes with Joseph visiting Hannah in prison, implying that each has somehow been the catalyst for a spiritual transformation in the other.

The above synopsis suggests that *Tyrannosaur* conforms to the model of a dramatically conventional work of British realism, offering what is in essence a character-led snapshot of a

brutal way of life. However, this would be an underestimation of its multi-layered aesthetic, which is defined by a cathartic power to simultaneously shock and comfort. In the *Red Riding* Trilogy, spiritual light, in the form of compassion between human beings, appears in short supply. In contrast to this, *Tyrannosaur* scrutinises its flawed and vulnerable cast of characters and, in suggesting a modest if not triumphant salvation for them, concludes that they are worthy of empathy. One of the film's themes is that pain is ubiquitous and transcends class barriers. So the working-class Joseph and the middle-class Hannah and James are brought to a similar level by their suffering. Ultimately, and perhaps surprisingly, the film overflows with humanity. In this it attains epic status because, in concerning itself with man's place in his community, it echoes Highet: 'The epic, like the symphony, addresses all the spirit of man.' (2015: 161) By the conclusion of Considine's film, the claim that it might address 'all the spirit of man' does not seem grandiose, but entirely fitting. Its apparent dramatic and structural simplicity belies a symphonic power which in turn is rooted in its subtle handling of theme, predominantly that of defeated masculinity.

Paul Dave, who writes on the depiction of class in British cinema, reflects on the typical screen depiction of working-class coming of age: 'in which the sense of unlived life, of potential, the fantasy of another life, is often impossibly attenuated, and the actual life, in all its crushing weight, is a struggle.' (2013: 747) Joseph, his late friend Jack, with whom it is implied by Jack's daughter Marie (Sally Carman) he used to run wild, and his drinking buddy Tommy (Ned Dennehy), who brags at the pub that he's 'gonna buy meself a zoo', are all depictions of working-class men who are either frustrated, violent or delusional. In this, *Tyrannosaur* conforms to Dave's thesis of proletarian characters being imprisoned by their circumstances but sensing the unachieved potential of a life unlived. Considine's perception of class boundaries differs from Dave's, however, in that he offers us a gallery of what are inarguably portraits of powerless masculinity, but views this impotence as being irrespective

of class and, as we shall see later in this chapter, of gender. One example of Considine's sophistication in his blurring of class distinctions is that the film's least powerful male character is James, who is not a working- but a middle-class character. Similarly, Joseph has to overcome his class prejudices when he realises that the actual life of Hannah does not conform to his middle-class fantasy of it, but is as much a struggle as his own.

Dave's view of working-class life as a struggle also connects with the idea of the struggle as central to the epic mode. As Merchant says of *Beowulf*, 'The hero is engaged in a struggle with the powers of darkness, a struggle which must end in defeat and decay.' (1971: 20) *Tyrannosaur* presents us with a mythic narrative in that it can be read as a chronicle of Joseph's ceaseless struggle. However, the forces against which he strives emanate as much from within himself as from any external antagonist. The powers of darkness which bear down upon Eddie and Hunter in the *Red Riding* Trilogy are real, rooted in a corrupt social structure, but for Joseph they exist within his own personality. A possibly over-simplistic but accurate interpretation of Considine's film is that it is a tale of redemption, charting an individual's journey from a state of alienation to one of reconciliation. In this respect, Joseph's narrative represents a subversion of Merchant's template in that this struggle does not end in defeat and decay, but in a cautious redemption. Instead, defeat and decay more aptly describe the atmosphere and landscape established at the beginning of the film. This is a social context of which Dave provides an overview: 'If we see Britain, both historically and contemporaneously, as a tense interlocking of powerful class forces and antagonisms, then what confronts us is less stability than a culture and society caught in a vice of developed capitalist relations.' (2013: 754)

Here Dave's view overlaps with the work of scholars such as Williams and Fisher, as previously discussed, who share his standpoint that capitalism breeds a materialistic outlook, as well as cultural and social amnesia. It results in what Williams calls 'the endless

complication of intermediate classes' (2016: 56) and what Fisher calls 'the mediocre satisfactions one can glean in a world governed by capitalist realism.' (2014: 22) The characters of *Tyrannosaur* are caught in this cultural and social vice, and Dave's 'tense interlocking' of powerful forces is the social backdrop not only to *Tyrannosaur* but the other contemporary British films under discussion. What makes Considine's film aesthetically and morally exhilarating is how on the one hand it acknowledges that its characters are caught in a vice and that for them, as described by Dave, actual life is possessed of a crushing weight. On the other hand, however, it suggests that there is a spiritual transcendence available in the struggle, and therefore that individuals are not necessarily defined by the vice in which they are caught. This humanist aesthetic is achieved, as the next section will argue, by a balanced integration of the masculine, the animal and the mythic.

Man and Animal



Fig.2

A key image from *Tyrannosaur*, with which the film opens and to which it returns, is of Joseph tapping a baseball bat against his forehead, a paradoxical symbol of both pent-up aggression and male impotence (Fig. 2). The bat's association with violence, as well as its phallic shape, make it part of an explicitly masculine image system which Considine builds up across the film. Another example of this is the association of a red sports car, an image

similarly suggestive of male potency, with the character of its owner James. His façade of assurance and control is undermined, with violent consequences for both of them, by the reality of his being mocked by Hannah for having a little penis. These images signify a world of superficial machismo that crosses class barriers and is full of misogyny and homophobia. It goes from James' savage treatment of Hannah, to Joseph taking out his frustrations on a lad playing pool in the pub by threatening 'Want me to suck your cock?' When, in a pub singalong after Jack's funeral, Joseph sings the words 'I'm a man you don't meet every day', the self-mythologising sentimentality of the lyric is ironic. Far from being a unique, extraordinary male, the reality is that in the world of *Tyrannosaur* the opposite is true. In an environment where for most individuals existence is an identical struggle, it is likely that you do meet a man like Joseph every day. What lends the film another layer of humanity is that Joseph is aware that he and his community are mythologising themselves, but it is preferable to admitting the truth, that they are powerless men who live in a land of the dead.

If for Merchant 'The hero is engaged in a struggle with the powers of darkness' (1971: 20) then Joseph is not the hero of Considine's narrative, but its anti-hero. The powers of darkness with which he struggles emanate from within himself. The sophistication of the film's argument is that at the same time it implies the rage with which he wrestles, which renders him destructive to himself and to others, and confers upon him the status of anti-hero because he embodies both protagonist and antagonist, is a result of his environment. This environment is shown in *Tyrannosaur* to be by turns banal, abandoned and financially straitened. In this instance the powers of darkness manifest, not as an active conspiracy as in the *Red Riding* Trilogy, but simply as the narrowness of a certain contemporary urban existence. If Joseph is the anti-hero of this epic, it contributes to the argument that the film constitutes not an epic, but an anti-epic. The anti-epic stance is defined by how it uses and subverts tropes which we associate with a heroic narrative. So, Joseph is a man of action but in contrast to an epic hero

like Achilles, who shows his expertise in combat in the context of the Trojan War, the weapon his twenty-first century counterpart wields is not a sword but a baseball bat. Furthermore he uses it not in battle, but to demolish his own shed. Joseph smashes windows and runs away, verbally intimidates men and women, and kills dogs. In this way he is more a pathetic than a heroic figure, and an emblem of defeated masculinity.

Elsewhere this thesis has discussed the effectiveness of the deployment of animal imagery in the films of Andrea Arnold. It represents the irruption of nature into an intensely urban environment in *Red Road*, or the alignment of the human with the animal in *Wuthering Heights. Tyrannosaur* similarly uses animal imagery but, whereas for Arnold it symbolises freedom or harmony, for Considine it signifies the opposite. This is the near-primitive state of alienation and disenfranchisement in which his characters live, and which is established at the start of the narrative by Joseph brutally kicking his own dog to death. Throughout Considine's film, animal imagery is used to compound a vision of the degradation of humanity and so augments an atmosphere of social and moral defeat.

An example of this is the subplot concerning Joseph's neighbour, a boy called Sam (Samuel Bottomley) who functions as the film's locus of innocence and its sacrificial lamb. The relationship between Joseph and Sam is touching, its mutual trust and honesty representing a temporary respite from the hostility that permeates the adult characters. However, the boyfriend (Paul Popplewell) of the boy's mother proudly owns a terrifying dog, which at the end of the narrative savages Sam and disfigures him. In retribution Joseph kills the dog and, in a horrifying tableau, sits outside his house, his face stained by the animal's blood, its severed head in his lap (Fig. 3). The event is shown in flashback, narrated in voiceover by Joseph in the form of a letter to Hannah, who is now in prison: 'An animal can only take so much punishment and humiliation before it snaps, fights back. It's its nature.' Joseph's words, while literally accompanying the dog's attack on the boy, are clear in their subtext. It

is not just the dog, but the human whose nature it is to snap and fight back, implying that Joseph sees himself at the level not of a man but of an animal. The self-reflexivity contained within Joseph's next phrase, as he narrates his violent act of retribution - 'think I went a bit native' – crystallises the paradoxical quality of Considine's attitude to his characters. Physically and morally, they experience punishment and humiliation, but they are also fully aware of their existential prison.



Fig.3

Joseph's acknowledgment of violence as something native is expressed by Considine in a series of primal images that synthesises masculine and animal tropes, with the result that the film is lent mythic resonance. For example, in the climactic scene as discussed above, where Joseph sits bloodstained in an armchair outside his house, the head of his neighbour's dog in his lap, the horrific and absurd image recalls but also parodies a tribal chieftain sitting on his throne. The masculine, the animal and the mythic triangulate at this moment to suggest that the authentic society of *Tyrannosaur* is one where the savagery of primitive retribution holds sway. Similarly the image of the dog's owner (Fig. 4), gold chain around his neck, naked from the waist up and shouting in fury at Joseph, echoes and parodies both a warrior going into battle, and a savage dog. Considine consciously draws on the mythic resonance of such imagery, however, to subvert these heroic poses and expose them as the futile and irrelevant gestures they are in a modern context. This is because his project is to shine a light on the

human pathos of the situation. In this, his work accords with Highet's stipulation, as discussed at the opening of this chapter, that the epic must connect 'with as much historical, geographical and spiritual background as will make it something much more deeply significant than any isolated incident, however remarkable, and causing it to embody a profound moral truth.' (2015: 24) With *Tyrannosaur*, Considine achieves this, connecting his narrative with the requisite complexity of background to confer upon his material a deep significance and a sense that, in its humanistic universality, it is embodying a profound moral truth. In contrast to the predators of the *Red Riding* Trilogy, those of *Tyrannosaur* are visible. They may take the form of the savage dog, or of James who is not a shadowy cartel but simply a violent man. The humanity of Considine's aesthetic lies in its conclusion that danger emanates not from a conspiracy, but from social conditions and human flaws. In this way the film constitutes a screenwork which conforms to notions of the epic mode. At the same time, in the questions it raises with regard to tribalistic masculine behaviour in contemporary society, it moves beyond them to operate in a mode which more closely approximates a new mode of anti-epic.



Fig.4

An Alternative Catechism

This chapter has considered the depiction, and deconstruction, of the roles played by social environment and by the heroic figure in *Tyrannosaur*, and how they contribute to its

redefinition of the epic mode into one that opposes it, the anti-epic. This concluding section will reflect on two further ways in which the film subverts notions of the epic to manifest as an anti-epic. Firstly in its treatment of gender, and secondly, articulated through dialogue exchanges between characters, in its engagement with the spiritual and the metaphysical.

As discussed previously, for Highet heroic poetry 'prefers to tell of the defeat which makes the brave man even braver and rounds off his life.' (2015: 27-8) I have established that the narrative of *Tyrannosaur* reverses this. It achieves this by beginning in a state of defeat, as evidenced by the oppressive circumstances, both spatial and social, in which its principal characters find themselves. After this it moves towards a concluding note of cautious promise, even of hope, in that Joseph and Hannah offer each other mutual support and in so doing reaffirm their common humanity. With regard to the epic concept of the brave man, similarly to the flawed male protagonists of the *Red Riding* Trilogy, by protecting a woman Joseph is unconvincing in his attempts to act as a knight in tarnished armour. What qualifies him more persuasively as a brave man is that, in his developing relationship with Hannah, he is finally able to lower his hostile guard, to acknowledge his past cruelty to his late wife, and to offer comfort to a fellow human being. It is in its attitude to gender, in the delicacy of the relationship between Joseph and Hannah, and especially in the development of the character of Hannah, that *Tyrannosaur* is inestimably a more satisfying screenwork than the *Red Riding* Trilogy. With regards to the latter, the conclusion is inescapable that its female characters principally exist as foils to the males. In *1974*, *1980* and *1983*, despite nuanced portrayals by their performers, the function of the characters of, respectively, Paula (Rebecca Hall), Helen (Maxine Peake) and Mandy (Saskia Reeves) is to be either murdered or exploited, or both, by patriarchal male figures such as Dawson (Sean Bean) and Laws (Peter Mullan). They are what Nick James calls 'drained women' (2009: 33). Their life has been drained by men, and it is arguable and unfortunate that their place in the overarching aesthetic of the *Red Riding*

Trilogy is to add a different colour to a largely misogynistic palette. It is true that, in the context of the narrative of the trilogy, of the period and region in which it is set, and of its damning indictment of male authority, this approach to depicting a misogynistic hierarchy is both dramatically and sociologically justified. However, it remains problematic that the world of the *Red Riding* Trilogy is one whose victims are predominantly children and women.

Hannah in *Tyrannosaur* is also unquestionably a victim, but this is mitigated by the fact that so is everyone else in the narrative. One of the greatest achievements of the film is its sure-footed development of the character of its female protagonist. Hannah begins her journey as an individual who, like Joseph, we initially assume to conform to a stereotype of a middle-class woman working in a charity shop. She ends it as a murderess with whom we empathise but whose actions we do not condone. Hannah does not conform to Joseph's idea of a damsel in distress. His view of women until now is summed up by his admission to Hannah that he thought his wife was naïve, and that 'I stomped it out of her'. The fundamental sexism of Joseph's outlook is reflected by the implication, when he discovers that Hannah has murdered James, that his shocked reaction is based in a conviction that such an act of violence is a man's work, but not a woman's. In the delicacy and complexity of its handling of gender, *Tyrannosaur* further questions traditional notions of the epic hero by offering us not a hero, but a heroine. Within the mode of anti-epic which this chapter has newly defined, it is Hannah, not Joseph, who acts heroically. This represents another way in which the film subverts notions relating to the epic mode: it tells of the deeds not of a brave man, but of a brave woman.



Fig.5

In its preference for what might be termed a classical shooting style, the visual aesthetic of *Tyrannosaur* contrasts with many of the other contemporary British films under discussion. This style is exemplified by the use of simple framing with the camera placed on a tripod (Fig. 5), instead of hand-held camerawork to recreate the apparent verisimilitude of the documentary mode, as given prominence by filmmakers discussed elsewhere in this thesis, such as Arnold, Barnard and Wheatley. Cinematographically this aesthetic project can be summarised as obeying an imperative not to distract from the subject matter, the force of which it seeks to deliver instead by the exercise of restraint. At the same time it is noticeable that the style of many of the film's dialogue exchanges, specifically those between Joseph and Hannah, directly contradict this formal restraint. This fits with Considine's aesthetic in that these passages of dialogue are the more powerful for their incongruity.

These exchanges are playful, profane, contradictory and baroque in nature. As such they distil the film's philosophy, which might be described as at once contrarian and humanist, by implying a spiritual or metaphysical subtext. One example is Joseph's first encounter with Hannah. After receiving a beating, he hides in her charity shop behind a rack of dresses, and she approaches him without yet having seen his face:

> H: What's your name? – J: Robert de Niro. - H: Would you like a cup of tea, Robert? – J: Fuck off. – H: Would you like me to pray for you, Robert?

The above dialogue typifies two of Considine's stylistic hallmarks: his close attention to characterisation, and his ability to effect a rapid switch from the profane to the spiritual. In the world of the film it is believable that Joseph would ironically quip that he is a macho figure such as Robert de Niro. It is equally believable that Hannah, in her sincerity and piety, would either not get the reference, or get it and slyly play along. Either interpretation is possible. It is important that Hannah's final line connects this exchange to the film's wider spiritual theme, that what is ultimately at stake is the state of Joseph's and, later, Hannah's souls. In this way, *Tyrannosaur* functions at the level of a modern morality play.

This approach is developed in a later exchange between the two characters, when the badly beaten Hannah has sought and been granted refuge in Joseph's house, and offers him sympathy:

> H: God loves you – J: God ain't my fuckin' daddy. My daddy was a cunt, but he knew he was a cunt. God still thinks he's God. Nobody's told him otherwise.

The subversive nature of this exchange crystallises the film's dissenting attitude towards not only religion but also patriarchal figures more widely. Joseph, who like Considine himself is from a Catholic Irish background, pours scorn on Hannah's Christianity by articulating what amounts to a personal manifesto. The linguistic pyrotechnics of the mixture of profanity, dark humour and staccato sentences serve to strengthen the sense of pain lying behind his rage. Moreover, the call and response pattern of the dialogue discernibly follows and satirises that of the Roman Catholic catechism, ie. 'Who made you?' – 'God made me'. So the dialogue between Joseph and Hannah, in the way it probes at spiritual and metaphysical affairs, moves onto a dialectical plane and becomes a kind of alternative catechism.

Thematically, this simultaneous rejection and subversion of patriarchal religion manifests again when Joseph later asks Hannah to leave his house:

You brought your shite to my door and I don't want it. I'm not a Samaritan.

Once more, this line of dialogue encapsulates a wider spiritual dilemma at the heart of the narrative. The irony is that a Samaritan is precisely what Joseph must, and does, become by the end of the film. Its overarching story is a chronicle of his struggle to act correctly, honourably, heroically. In its attitude towards gender, as well as in its engagement with theme through dialogue, *Tyrannosaur* demonstrates further how it subverts notions of the epic and embraces a new mode of anti-epic.

Dispossession and Vacancy

In conclusion, it is appropriate to return to Hutchings' articulation, as discussed earlier in this thesis, of how space is depicted in the contemporary British films under consideration: 'There is yet another type of landscape to be found in British film and television … a landscape of a comprehensive dispossession and vacancy. It might best be thought of as the British anti-landscape.' (2004: 29) The *Red Riding* Trilogy and *Tyrannosaur* constitute screenworks that epitomise this British anti-landscape in that, as has been demonstrated in this chapter and the previous one, they conjure landscapes of 'comprehensive dispossession and vacancy'. These are empty and eerie spaces which reflect the vulnerability of the narratives' characters, and articulate a sense of their being at the mercy of, or simply abandoned by, those in authority. This sense of the inhuman, of ours being a society wherein characters' voices are either silenced or ignored, is developed by Hutchings in terms of the pressure it specifically exerts upon identity: '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.' (2004: 29) I read this as a contextualisation of the idea of the human self within the wider concept of national identity. It implies that, viewed in terms of nationhood, society as

depicted in these films is atomised, so that any sense of identity develops irrespective of a wider national context.

This thesis builds upon Hutchings' points to argue that this British anti-landscape belongs to an anti-nation. In the twenty-first-century British films upon which this thesis focuses, this is a space intersected by the modes of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic. However, as previously discussed, the nature of the films' aesthetic vision of landscape twists these modes so that they become distorted mirror images of themselves and are redefined as eerie, anti-pastoral, anti-heritage and anti-epic. The films under discussion suggest that this anti-nation, made up by the landscapes they depict, is not merely an alternative to the received, heritage-driven nation, but the true one. In terms of the relationship of identity to nationhood in the context of this anti-nation, what the *Red Riding* Trilogy and *Tyrannosaur* claim is that, instead of a connectivity between individual voices and national identity, these voices are constantly under threat of being diminished or removed. This is expressed in the films' abiding sense of dispossession and vacancy. It is captured in a single image an hour into the narrative of *Tyrannosaur*, when Joseph sits enthroned in his dirty armchair outside his house, surrounded by the debris of the shelter he has just demolished with his baseball bat. One interpretation is that he is lord of his domain, but the domain amounts to a wasteland in a neglected part of the city. Both Joseph and we know that beyond his house, beyond his street, no one cares. In this respect, the *Red Riding* Trilogy and *Tyrannosaur* are indictments of society's failure of its citizens, or 'modern national subjects' to use Hutchings' term. As such, the films both define the new mode of anti-epic, and also draw upon an epic tradition in that they assert a profound moral truth. They manage to be simultaneously of their time, chronicling and reflecting a time of change, and timeless.

The journeys and struggles of the protagonists, or anti-heroes, of the above-mentioned films are enacted against a backdrop of post-industrial northern society in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Britain, a space recognisable as a land of the dead. Therefore, on one level the films function as a chronicle of and sociological commentary on a civilisation itself, and in this they identify as what Merchant describes as 'a vital record of custom and tradition'. What they chronicle is the decline not of Rome or Christendom, but of the north of England. However, recalling Kavanagh's poem 'Epic' as discussed in the Introduction, where the poet emphasises the significance of a 'local row', the regionality of the films does not disqualify them from epic status. Any claim that they fulfil the requirements of an epic is legitimate. Furthermore, by identifying as contemporary epics, or anti-epics, they seek to move beyond conventional definitions, reclaiming and hybridising the term epic to arrive at a new definition.

In his survey of the epic tradition, Highet describes the eighteenth-century novels of Henry Fielding as 'prose epics' (2015: 342), suggesting that: '… by claiming that his novels were epics Fielding did state an important truth … This was that the poetic epic was dying, and that the forces it had once possessed were to flow into the modern novel.' (2015: 343) It is fruitful to consider this statement in the light of contemporary British cinema. If we replace the novels of three centuries ago with the films of the first two decades of the new century, the 'important truth' alleged by Highet still obtains. Fielding's claim, that the poetic epic was dying and its forces were to flow into the modern novel, can be applied to where contemporary British cinema finds itself. Fielding proposed taking the forces of the poetic epic and hybridising them to produce a new mode, the modern novel. Similarly, as these two chapters have shown, filmmakers such as Arnold, Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley have hybridised the forces of the poetic epic in a twenty-first century context.

These forces now flow into the British films under discussion, manifesting as the contemporary anti-epic.

Eerie-Pastoral-Heritage-Epic

CONCLUSION

TRUE HISTORIES, STRANGE SIMULTANEITY



The Last Tree (Shola Amoo, 2019)

This thesis began its investigations with the example of a particular scene in Arnold's *Wuthering Heights*, a scene whose force is the result of a successful integration of passion, violence, death, transgression and nature. The Introduction argued that, in this integration, it is typical of a cross-section of British films of the first two decades of the twenty-first century. These are united by their attitude to landscape, an approach identifiable by its shared underlying tension. Using the storytelling modes of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic, this thesis set out to investigate these landscapes of contemporary British film culture, considering the films' relation to earlier cinematic and literary traditions, and identifying the key traits which they manifest in relation to their handling of landscape. The Introduction offered the phrase 'the pestilence in the ditch' as a metaphor both for the spaces which these twenty-first century British films inhabit, and for the mood they project. It also argued that these screen landscapes of the new century are the cinematic manifestation of a cycle of ideas

that permeates literature and myth, and which is defined by its ambivalence towards landscape. These films' aura of dislocation, alienation and disenfranchisement, conjuring a sense in the viewer of being simultaneously in a place and somehow outside of it, contributes to their constituting a shadow strain of contemporary British cinema, in that they are uncommercial, underexamined works that are worthy of closer analysis.

Chapter One considered the employment of the eerie storytelling mode in the films *Dead Man's Shoes, The Hide*, *Kill List* and *Catch Me Daddy*. It reflected that it is the films' occupation of a liminal space or interzone that qualifies them as eerie. This space is also described, by Shoard and also by Farley and Symmons Roberts, as edgelands, and by Fisher as a land of the dead. The films' ambivalent aesthetic tone, poised between poetic and anti-poetic, imbues their landscapes with eerie qualities. This chapter also locates the films' shared underlying tension in the careful juxtaposition, in their treatment of landscape, of harmony and violence. Chapters Two and Three went on to consider the use of landscape in contemporary British cinema in terms of the pastoral mode. It reflected on the relevance of the use of the pastoral in two late twentieth-century films, *Witchfinder General* and *Winstanley*, to the contemporary films *A Field in England*, *The Selfish Giant* and *Dark River*. Chapter Two used Williams' counterpointing, in *The Country and the City*, of the falsification of history with the need for a more authentic view of the past, and applied this principle of the refusal of idealisation to the films of this study. It also underlined the value of the tension between harmony and violence to the treatment of the pastoral mode in these films' landscapes, and introduced the idea of the mode being subverted by the films into anti-pastoral. In *Witchfinder General* the pastoral is effectively replaced by the underlying presence of violence, and in this its aesthetic anticipates that of the contemporary British films in this study. In considering this new mode of anti-pastoral in three contemporary films, Chapter Three used Hudson's idea of the multiple memory of the dead to introduce the

concepts of haunted landscapes, shadow-sites and landscape ghosts into the argument of this thesis. This was highlighted by the argument that the live electric cable of *The Selfish Giant* functions as a physical representation of the pestilence on the ditch, and that what lies beneath the fields, under the landscape itself, is fatal, and therefore so is the pastoral.

The theme of the mutation of storytelling modes in relation to landscape continued in Chapters Four and Five, which looked at the shift of the mode of heritage, in the films *Wuthering Heights* and *Sightseers*, into a stance that can be identified as anti-heritage. Chapter Four introduced the notion that the contemporary British films of this study are engaged in a revolt against heritage. It argued that, in the case of Arnold's film of Emily Brontë's novel, its celebration of the physical signals the prioritisation of the human animal, and by extension a shared common humanity, over outward projections of heritage. In this way, Arnold's project is to revitalise the heritage film. Chapter Five posited *Sightseers* as a parody not only of *Wuthering Heights* but also, beyond that, of heritage itself. It further argued that what the viewer witnesses in key sequences that represent characters' unconscious states does in fact equate to the film's use of landscape, thus conferring upon the landscape the power of transgression, taboo and dreams. This unsettling quality pertaining to the landscape is shared by *Sightseers* with all the films of this study. It draws on the opposite of a touristic, commodified, heritage-centred view of the British landscape, taking an alternative approach that the conclusion of Chapter Five terms dream heritage. This concept connects the films' use of landscape with the human unconscious, and signifies the obverse or shadow side of the more acceptable self of British heritage. It also connects the filmmakers' aesthetic objective, to offer true histories, with their films' position as anti-heritage.

Chapters Six and Seven treated the use of the epic storytelling mode within landscapes of contemporary British cinema, principally in the *Red Riding* Trilogy and *Tyrannosaur*. Having

considered mythic storytelling traditions and definitions of the epic in world literature, such as the works of Homer and *Beowulf*, these chapters argued that the four films under discussion not only use but also subvert the epic mode in two areas: the scale of their storytelling, and their focus on contemporary anti-heroes as alternatives to heroes of classical antiquity. In this, the films qualify as epics, while simultaneously pushing to redefine the term. In the case of the *Red Riding* Trilogy, Chapter Six concluded that its ominous post-industrial landscapes are a reflection of the films' project to use a non-fictional time and place, in other words true history, to achieve an analysis of the state of the nation's soul. Chapter Seven argued for *Tyrannosaur* being a film about landscape, despite this landscape being one of urban deprivation. It offers, like the *Red Riding* Trilogy, a deeply flawed male protagonist and a northern, post-industrial setting, and thereby enacts a subversion of the epic mode with the result that the film's storytelling mode tilts towards its opposite, that of anti-epic. Chapter Seven concluded with the observation that the world of these contemporary British films presents an alternative or shadow version of the nation, which approximates to an anti-nation. This anti-nation is made up of the landscapes depicted by the films under discussion, and offers an alternative to the received, heritage-driven ideas of a nation as discussed in Chapters Four and Five, as well as constituting, in fact, the truer one.

What this study has then demonstrated is that, upon closer examination, certain British films of the twenty-first century seek to achieve two things. Firstly, they are using landscape in a revelatory way, as a means of critiquing the representation of the nation through cinema, literature and myth. Secondly, they are either subverting or renewing existing storytelling modes of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic as a means of achieving their objective of being true histories, rather than falsifications of the past. This thesis has drawn together the work of scholars such as Higson, Hockenhull, Hutchings and Williams, and of writers such as Mabey, Macfarlane and Fisher, to discuss the breadth of approaches to landscape in a literary and

culturally historic, as well as a cinematic, context by contemporary British filmmakers such as Arnold, Barnard, Considine, Meadows and Wheatley. It has looked at the use of landscape across some recent British films that it considers to be neglected. It has used overarching ideas key to a broader understanding of British culture to argue for the importance of these films in the first two decades of the new century, and addressed their relevance by using concepts of eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic. These storytelling modes were used because the use, renewal or subversion of them are central to the films' use of landscape, while a consideration of the films' relation to earlier literary and cinematic traditions shows how these have informed their filmmakers' aesthetic stance. This thesis has re-evaluated and updated the debate on contemporary British cinema through its focus on the use of landscape. What it has revealed is the deep ambivalence at the heart of all the films, a feature of work that is substantial. The films are pulled between, on the one hand, a romantic inclination to conserve and uphold cultural traditions and, on the other, their revolt against heritage, prestige and falsification.

Key areas have included the significance of liminality and thresholds in defining the nature of landscape in the films of this study. Another important strand is the prominence given by this shadow strain of British cinema to alienation and disenfranchisement, rebellion and revolt. This spirit of revolt is informed by the ambivalent relationship of this shadow strain of films with previous British cinema, which this thesis has also considered. Another strand has been how the films navigate the gap between myth, and falsification of the past, and finding an authentic way in which to confront this past. As an example of this, the Introduction juxtaposed a traditional, romanticised vision of the nation, as represented by Kipling's phrase 'Merlin's Isle of Gramarye', with the violent climax of Wheatley's *Kill List*. A further topic which this thesis has considered is the interrelationship between place, time and story. This is often manifested in the films under discussion as the presence of relic traces, hauntings and

the association of past trauma with a present location. An important and recurrent notion has been the need to fix upon not merely where, but when, the films are set. Released during the thirteen years of the new century between *Dead Man's Shoes* (2004) and *Dark River* (2017), the principal films of this study blur temporal boundaries between past, present and future, so that their narratives unfold not at a fixed point in time, but inside a continuum. This treatment by the films of their landscapes, be they urban, rural or edgelands in between, has the effect of imbuing them with uncertainty. Responding to them becomes a question of how and why they locate a story not only in a place, but in a time.

According to Fisher, this is because 'there is no present to grasp and articulate any more' (2014: 9) and that, since the 1960s, 'cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity.' (2014: 9) This idea of strange simultaneity, that we occupy past, present and future at once, emerges as a key point of this thesis, because it offers a lens through which to view how the films handle the intersection of place, time and story. To an extent, it can be described as this thesis' underlying formation. Why is there is a particular resonance between these three points of the triangle, and how does it manifest in the context of contemporary British cinema? Films which respond to landscape on a mythic level offer, in their imaginative integration of space and narrative, an alternative to traditional notions of heritage cinema. This thesis has asked, what are the variations played upon this relationship between place, time and story within contemporary British cinema? Beyond this, how are we to dissolve the artificial boundaries which have been erected in arguments relating to British cinema, and which might obscure other, equally important approaches to understanding the films?

One response to these questions, for which the preceding chapters have argued, is that there is a need to redraw and thereby refresh the critical framework by which much British cinema is judged, with the aim of recalibrating our reading of contemporary British film culture. For

example, as argued by Chapter Four, ultimately the achievement of Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* lies in how it plays an expert variation upon the triangulation of place, time and story, rather than its place within or without the tradition of British heritage cinema. Building upon this, the films of this study show that notions pertaining to national identity need not be linked solely to those of heritage. Writing a quarter of a century ago, it was legitimate that Andrew Higson should say: 'This question 'who shall inherit England?' is central to the heritage film' (1996: 239). During the first two decades of this century, however, what this thesis has called the anti-heritage film shows its protagonists, the presumed heirs, finding ways to reject this inheritance. They do this through violent irreverence, as in *Sightseers*, or through tragic implosion, as in the *Red Riding* Trilogy and *Tyrannosaur*. Thus, these films' answer to Higson's question of who shall inherit England appears to be: there's not much here worth inheriting. This circles back to the idea of not just where, but when, the films are set. It appears to be the case that, as Fisher says and the films echo, there is no present to grasp or articulate anymore.

This uncertainty about the present goes some way to explaining why the shadow strain of contemporary British cinema, which this thesis foregrounds, should exist, even flourish, in this particular moment. So, where do we find ourselves? A consideration of the films in terms of how they reinvent and cross-pollinate eerie, pastoral, heritage and epic offers an answer to this. This thesis identifies the atmosphere which unites the films aesthetically as a shared sense of unease and disenfranchisement. Williams puts this in sociological terms: 'For we have really to look, in country and city alike, at the real social processes of alienation, separation, externality, abstraction.' (2016: 428) It is expressed by Macfarlane in cultural terms: 'What is under way, across a broad spectrum of culture, is an attempt to account for the turbulence of England in the era of late capitalism.' (2015) Both writers' tone evokes uncertainty, instability, even apocalypse, and they propose that what is at stake is nothing less

than society itself. Such alienation and turbulence find expression in the films' balancing of place, time and story, which functions as an extension of Hutchings' view that 'the relationship between the people and the land is complex and fraught with uncertainty.' (2004: 39) It also recalls the words of the titular protagonist of *Winstanley*, as discussed in Chapter Two, that 'England is a prison … the lawyers are the jailers, and poor men are the prisoners.' In the contemporary British films under discussion, this theme recurs of humans' disenfranchisement from, and disharmony with, the space within which they find themselves, which can in turn be read as a reflection of the filmmakers' ambivalent stance towards British society in the early twenty-first century.

Returning to the subject of the need to dissolve artificial critical boundaries, *The Selfish Giant* offers a case in point. While clearly in the tradition of British social realism, as typified by its debt to Ken Loach's 1969 film *Kes*, *The Selfish Giant* belongs equally, in its combination of child's point of view and mythic narrative, to the fabular, visionary storytelling tradition of American cinema such as Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). This is another manifestation of the practice of miscategorisation within British cinema. So, why not finally lay to rest the old polarity between social realism and fantasy? As this thesis has argued, there is a sense that developments in current British cinema move the two closer together, if indeed they were ever that far apart, and that perceived lines between them are now irrevocably, emphatically blurred. This sense of a new spirit of cross-pollination in the new century is exemplified by *A Field in England*, a film which does not fall into a neat category, being both iconoclastic and a pastoral ode to a lost England. What is remarkable about it, and holds true for the other contemporary British films under discussion, is how it inhabits the above-mentioned triangulation of place, time and story to make us reflect upon the history of a space by means of the lens of the narrative through which we view it. The aesthetic result is a film which contains no boundaries, one which at once observes Aristotle's dramatic unity of

time, action and place, and at the same time explodes each of those elements into infinity. Thus, an attempt at categorisation becomes redundant, and instead these films leave the viewer with a series of traces, or echoes. The first trace might be that the films prioritise authenticity, and so connote true histories of place. The second is that they are temporally uncertain, and so exist in a strange simultaneity between past, present and future. The third, which was advanced in Chapter Five's discussion of *Sightseers,* is that they represent an idea of dream heritage, meaning an alternative heritage that is based on unconscious and personal interaction with space, be that space the country or the city. The result is that borders are blurred between a place, its history and a character's psychological experience of it, to the extent that subjective and objective, rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, become interchangeable. One possible conclusion, therefore, is that these contemporary British films offer a map of the nation's unconscious.

Drawing together these points with a view to considering a way forward, the question persists of why this shadow strain of British cinema should exist in this particular moment. It is tempting to point to a connection between the films' landscapes of unease and disenfranchisement, a manifestation of Williams' 'social processes of alienation' (2016: 428), and the last two decades' political situation of increasing economic austerity, in an island nation severing its connections with mainland Europe. However, further research is needed into this area, and such considerations fall outside the scope of this thesis. In cinematic terms, what is compelling is how the question of this shadow strain returns us, as acknowledged in the Introduction and throughout the thesis, to what Julian Petley describes, in an essay in Charles Barr's *All Our Yesterdays*, as a lost continent of British cinema:

> One suspects that if the institution of the British cinema could be radically reconceptualised and wrested from the grasp of the still tenacious realist aesthetic,

> then the films discussed in this chapter would look less like isolated islands revealing themselves, and more like the peaks of a long submerged lost continent. (1986:118)

In their vivid and iconoclastic use of landscape, the contemporary British films under discussion represent the peaks of Petley's lost continent, no longer submerged but receiving adequate attention. A very recently released group of British films continues this new tradition of distinctive, visionary work which allies provocative use of location with themes of alienation and disenfranchisement. These films include *The Last Tree* (Shola Amoo, 2019), *Make Up* (Claire Oakley, 2019), *Amulet* (Romola Garai, 2020), *In the Earth* (Ben Wheatley, 2021) and *Censor* (Prano Bailey-Bond, 2021). In terms of its triangulation of place, time and story, *The Last Tree* follows this formula. It is a drama about a male protagonist who feels himself to be an outsider in conventional society. It is set in a predominantly urban location whose oppressive nature equates to the character's psychological landscape. Its narrative pivots around emotionally charged sequences that take place in a setting possessed of metaphorical power, in this case the fens of East Anglia, which sequence constitutes an idyll or an epiphany, or something of both. It transcends traditional realism to reach for an existential dimension.

The Last Tree is a rite of passage narrative about the black, urban experience in contemporary London and Nigeria. And yet, universally, it concerns the search for identity. It discards realism in favour of expressionism, and relies upon, indeed rejoices in, a highly cinematic resonance between place, time and story. In its ambivalence and confidence, it suggests a possible way forward from the contemporary British films which this thesis has explored. These all revolt against heritage, and all identify variously as eerie, anti-pastoral and anti-epic. Merely to characterise them, therefore, as rebel films would be to limit their scope, as it would limit *The Last Tree*. Instead, it would be more accurate to describe the films' project as a rejection of the falsification of history, in order that we may more clearly see the

multiplicity of truths available. Looking ahead, these films of the first two decades of the twenty-first century return to a continent that is not lost, but new. They reconstitute 'Merlin's Isle of Gramarye' for the new century. Cinematically speaking, they are its new Gramarye.

Key Films

Catch Me Daddy (dir. Daniel Wolfe, 2014, UK, 1 hr 52 mins. Film4/BFI/Screen Yorkshire)

Dark River (dir. Clio Barnard, 2017, UK, 1 hr 29 mins. Film4/Left Bank Pictures/Moonspun Films)

Dead Man's Shoes (dir. Shane Meadows, 2004, UK, 1 hr 30 mins. Warp Films/Big Arty Productions/EM Media/Film4)

A Field in England (dir. Ben Wheatley, 2013, UK, 1 hr 31 mins. Film4/Rook Films)

Fish Tank (dir. Andrea Arnold, 2009, UK, 2 hrs 3 mins. BBC Films/UK Film Council/Kasander Film Company/Limelight Communication/ContentFilm)

The Hide (dir. Marek Losey, 2008, UK, 1 hr 24 mins. Poisson Rouge Pictures/Solution Films)

Kill List (dir. Ben Wheatley, 2011, UK, 1 hr 35 mins. Warp X/Rook Films/Film4/UK Film Council/Screen Yorkshire)

Red Riding 1974 (dir. Julian Jarrold, 2009, UK, 1 hr 42 mins. Channel 4)

Red Riding 1980 (dir. James Marsh, 2009, UK, 1 hr 33 mins. Channel 4)

Red Riding 1983 (dir. Anand Tucker, 2009, UK, 1 hr 45 mins. Channel 4)

Red Road (dir. Andrea Arnold, 2006, UK, 1 hr 53 mins. UK Film Council/Scottish Screen/Glasgow Film Office/BBC Films/Zoma Films/Verve Pictures/Sigma Films/Zentropa Entertainment)

The Selfish Giant (dir. Clio Barnard, 2013, UK, 1 hr 31 mins. BFI/Film4/Moonspun Films)

Sightseers (dir. Ben Wheatley, 2012, UK, 1 hr 28 mins. StudioCanal/Big Talk Pictures/Film4/BFI Film Fund/Rook Films)

Tyrannosaur (dir. Paddy Considine, 2011, UK, 1 hr 32 mins. Warp X/Inflammable Films/Film4/UK Film Council/Screen Yorkshire/EM Media/Optimum Releasing)

Wuthering Heights (dir. Andrea Arnold, 2011, UK, 2 hrs 9 mins. HanWay Films/Ecosse Films/Film4/UK Film Council/Screen Yorkshire/Goldcrest Films International)

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