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Give a dog a bone: representations of Scotland in the popular genre cinema of Neil Marshall

Abstract

The best-known and most influential cinematic image of Scotland is that which constructs the country as the civilised modern world's northern boundary and ideological antithesis. This historically venerable representational tradition incorporates *Brigadoon* (Vincente Minnelli, USA, 1954), *Brave* (Mark Andrews/Brenda Chapman/Steve Purcell, USA, 2012) and much else in between. The following essay examines what is perhaps the most explicit and extended twenty-first-century manifestation to date of Scotland's classic celluloid stereotype: the oeuvre of British popular genre filmmaker Neil Marshall. Analysis of this director's Scottish trilogy – *Dog Soldiers* (GB/Lux/USA, 2002), *Doomsday* (GB/USA/SA/Ger, 2008), and *Centurion* (GB/Fr, 2010) – suggests not simply the historical persistence of a particular cultural representation of a particular national culture and identity, but also the varied, and often non-nationally specific, thematic uses to which Scottish cinematic stereotypes can be and are put. That conclusion suggests a number of possible future directions for Scottish cinema criticism more generally. Firstly, the need for a more inclusive critical engagement with popular genre cinema, a hitherto under-examined area with the study of Scotland's relationship with the moving image. Secondly, the extent to which critics might usefully approach Scottish-set and –themed cinema in a more multifaceted manner than has frequently been the case in historical terms. Neil Marshall's oeuvre exemplifies the complex interplay of nationally *and* non-nationally specific images and ideas that exist within many popular filmic representations of Scotland.

Keywords: Neil Marshall; Scotland; Scottish cinema; British cinema; national cinema; national identity

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Introduction

The topmost point of the compass plays a pivotal role in the cinematic representation of Scotland. Northward journeys across the country's southern border, a dividing line figured as physical, political, and psychological in nature, constitute the most historically persistent narrative tradition of depicting Scottish history, identity, and society in popular film. From *Brigadoon* (Vincente Minnelli, USA, 1954) to *Brave* (Mark Andrews/Brenda Chapman/Steve Purcell, USA, 2012), *Laxdale Hall* (John Eldridge, GB, 1953) to *Local Hero* (Bill Forsyth, GB, 1983), Scotland is repeatedly figured as 'a distant periphery [defined by] the idea of remoteness – physical, social, moral – from metropolitan rules, conventions and certainties' (Petrie 2000, 32). Within this hegemonic representational tradition, a perverse conflict between Modernity and Tradition replays repeatedly somewhere in "The Wilds of Scotland"TM. Isolated representatives of the former are trounced or seduced at every turn by amoral adherents to the latter. This is so notwithstanding diametrically opposed long-term historical and cultural shifts experienced elsewhere in the Occident. Scotland is presented as a place and a mindset definitively out of kilter with Western rationality (Murray 2005).

Historically speaking, this idea of a nation and national identity that exists somewhere out of time – or, more negatively, which is consigned to the dustbin of history – has possessed sufficient ideological and commercial power to penetrate a range of ostensibly distinct narrative and aesthetic traditions of depicting Scotland within popular film and television. Its presence is marked, for instance, within the often-discussed representational modes of Tartanry, Kailyard, and Clydeside identified and analysed within the 1982 anthology publication *Scotch Reels* (McArthur, 1982), the foundational text of academic Scottish cinema criticism. At first sight, each element of this trilogy seems clearly distinct from the others. Tartanry is associated with a rural Highland iconography and is characteristically focused on the highly (R)omanticised portrayal of historical events and personages dating from the first half of the eighteenth century, specifically, the two abortive Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745. The national identity that Tartanry constructs is typically pre-Modern, pre-British and tribal, the preserve of attractively Noble Savages. Kailyard is less geographically and historically specific than Tartanry, though its classical manifestation is as a late-nineteenth-century, rural Lowland narrative mode. It is concerned with the comic satirisation, valorisation (or both simultaneously) of intensely parochial communities and worldviews that are projected onto Scottish national identity as a whole. Clydeside, by contrast, is a twentieth-century urban (specifically, West Coast or Glasgow-based) representational tradition typically focused upon political conflict in the heavy industrial workplace and the social and economic pressures faced in contemporary Scottish urban working- and post-working-class existence more generally. But despite their obvious differences, John Caughie perceptively notes (1990, 16) that these three traditions have been intimately linked to each other throughout cinema history by the shared representational motif of ‘epic transformation rendered as a loss’ which surfaces in many of their individual cinematic articulations of Scotland and Scottishness.

This essay interrogates both the enduring contemporary influence and some of the ideological complexities and (self-) contradictions of the venerable cinematic tradition of representing Scottish culture and identity as pre- and/or anti-modern phenomena. It does so by examining the work of the twenty-first century British genre filmmaker Neil Marshall. The latter’s relatively prolific career to date (Marshall made four features between 2002 and 2010) reflects the increasing prominence of popular genre production modes (horror especially) within the contemporary UK film industry (Leggott, 2008; Macnab 2009; Murray 2014). Few directors in cinema history have exploited the entrenched stereotype of Scotland as northerly antithesis of the Modern with such enthusiasm, explicitness, and regularity as Marshall. In promotional interviews supporting his three Scottish-set features to date, the director repeatedly stresses personal experience of the Scotland/England border (Marshall was born and raised on Tyneside) as a key inspiration for his creative practice. *Dog Soldiers* (GB/Lux/USA, 2002) pits British squaddies against Celtic lycanthropes and gestated from the fact that, in Marshall’s words, ‘I fell in love with the Highlands after years of going on holiday there... a country full of beauty as well as underlying menace... the perfect atmospheric location to have something wild and ferocious running around’ (Jones 2002, 40). The director stressed his geographical roots once more when discussing his third feature, *Doomsday* (GB/USA/SA/Ger, 2008), a lurid post-apocalyptic potboiler that sees a deadly viral pandemic cut Scotland off from the rest of the world: ‘I grew up in Newcastle and lived in Carlisle and spent a lot of time driving along Hadrian’s

Wall and often wondered under what circumstances the wall would be rebuilt' (Kay 2007). Marshall subsequently cited the same archaeological landmark when explaining the origins of *Centurion* (GB/Fr, 2010), a speculative chase-movie account of the mysterious fate of the fabled Roman Ninth Legion, popularly believed to have been decimated while on manoeuvres in second-century Caledonia (Cooper 2009).

Marshall's Scottish-set films are worthy of sustained critical attention for several reasons. Firstly, they are a salutary reminder of the continuing resonance of a venerable tradition of representing Scotland within cinema and popular culture – and also of the ideologically problematic manner in which that tradition often addresses international audiences. Secondly, the films help to explain why certain hegemonic images of that nation and national identity still persist so strongly today. Marshall's work does not reiterate classic cinematic stereotypes of Scotland as a self-sufficient representational aim. Rather, it uses the pre-/anti-modern trope as a vehicle through which to explore a varied range of thematic concerns. These include anxieties around present-day experiences of increasing ethnic and racial hybridity (*Doomsday*) and the self-inflicted traumas endured by over-mighty geopolitical superpowers past and present (*Centurion*). Marshall is thus a suggestive example of a modern-day filmmaker who talks about a specific nation (Scotland) in part because this allows his films to talk about much that is non-nationally specific in nature and relevance. Thirdly, Marshall's cinema is unashamedly populist and often commercially popular in international terms. That kind of filmmaking, what the director terms 'movies for an international audience but with a strong British sensibility... films for the Saturday night multiplex audience' (Anon 2009, 24), has been under-documented within Scottish cinema criticism to date. That scholarly tradition often prefers to focus its attention on figures such as Lynne Ramsay, culturally prestigious filmmakers whose work can be aligned with a European art cinema tradition (see, for instance, Neely 2008; Sillars and Macdonald 2008; Caughie 2012), or on social realist cinematic traditions that anatomise the iniquities and inequalities of contemporary urban Scotland in extended, and frequently enraged, detail (see, for instance, Hill 2009). Examining the work of a director like Marshall assists, therefore, in the construction of a more comprehensive account of Scotland's representation in contemporary feature film, and of the cultural and ideological factors that inform the nation's global image.

Dog Soldiers

Like all of Marshall's Scottish-set features, *Dog Soldiers* makes issues of topography and cartography central to its thematic project. The horror inherent within the northward journey at the heart of the film's narrative is two-fold in nature. On the immediately obvious level of story, the Scottish Highlands prove home to a pack of near-indestructible lycanthropes that decimates a squad of British soldiers set down in the wrong place at the wrong time by a seemingly innocuous military training exercise. More fundamentally, however, the movie defines its setting as one that endangers not only specific human lives, but also the stability of human identity *per se*. The Scotland of *Dog Soldiers* is a space within which a series of key physical and ideological dividing lines are subjected to savage and sustained assault. Civilised Superego is set upon by animalistic Id; the physical and psychological security of home is decimated by the relentless encroachment of Nature red in tooth

and claw; the chronologically and technologically mediated present finds itself fodder for the violent impulses of an eternally recurring atavistic past.

Dog Soldiers wastes little time in introducing a native Highland species decidedly more bloodthirsty than the ubiquitous midge. Exactly one month after two unsuspecting English campers are eviscerated by an unseen predator, a team of six British Army squaddies, led by Sergeant Wells (Sean Pertwee) and Private Cooper (Kevin McKidd), is airlifted into Scotland's northern wilderness for a routine war game simulation that pits them against a Special Forces unit headed by the ruthless Major Ryan (Liam Cunningham). Cooper and Ryan's paths have already crossed: the former has made a mortal enemy of the latter due to his principled refusal to shoot an innocent dog as part of a sadistic obedience test during a Special Forces recruitment exercise. But Ryan does not seem to be the most immediately pressing threat. The Major is wounded to the point of death, his team torn to shreds by unspecified assailants, when Cooper and his colleagues stumble upon him. The men are then immediately attacked by a pack of giant lycanthropes and escape death only due to their seemingly coincidental meeting with Megan (Emma Cleasby), a young English zoologist who drives them to apparent safety at a nearby farmhouse owned by her friends. But the latter are nowhere to be seen and the werewolves' arrival cuts off the possibility of escape. Forced to hole up and hold out for the night, the soldiers find themselves fighting a war on two fronts. The enemy without is obvious, but that within is only belatedly revealed. Ryan eventually confesses that he had official authorisation to use Wells' squad as bait to capture a live werewolf in order that the species' potential military uses might be assessed by the British government; his infected wounds at the lycanthropes' hands then transform him into one of them. Megan subsequently reveals that she too has become one of the creatures at some point during her time in the Highlands. The farmhouse to which she has led the troops is in fact their enemies' lair. An ensuing climactic conflagration sees all protagonists killed bar Cooper, who lives to tell his tale to a cheerfully disbelieving tabloid press more interested in the result of a recent England-Germany football match.

Dog Soldiers makes clear and enthusiastic recourse to a range of narrative and thematic motifs associated with Scotland's traditional representation in popular cinema. The fate suffered by Megan, Ryan, and Wells (all non-Scots) is a horrific version of the far-reaching personal transformation that cinematic Scotland typically provokes within the incoming protagonists of films such as *The Maggie* (Alexander Mackendrick, GB, 1954) or *The Last Great Wilderness* (David Mackenzie, GB/Dk, 2002). The idea of Scotland as a supernatural space which confounds rationalist beliefs in the existence of, in Megan's words, 'a line between myth and reality... a very fine line sometimes, but at least it was a line,' also gives birth to a folkloric Caledonian bestiary in movies such as *Loch Ness* (John Henderson, GB/USA, 1996), *The Water Horse* (Jay Russell, USA/GB/Aus, 2007), and *Brave*. For these and other reasons, David Martin-Jones presents an ingenious extended analysis of *Dog Soldiers*, stressing the politically resonant ways in which the film might be interpreted within the contemporary context of Scotland's devolution from the cultural and political structures of the unitary British state. Martin-Jones sees at work within the movie both 'an Anglocentric desire... to reaffirm a traditional sense of British national identity' (2009, 115) and 'an allegory for the potential return of Scottish national

identity' (ibid, 123). Kirsty MacDonald also positions *Dog Soldiers* on nationally specific thematic territory, arguing that:

the film's narrative can be interpreted as a punishment visited on the descendants for the sins of their ancestors... in this case the descendants are the British army, with which the Highlands has a troublesome historic relationship characterised by exploitation and oppression and dating from the Jacobite uprisings onwards... the only survivor... is the one Scottish soldier in the squad, the only man immune from ancestral culpability. (2011, 46)

Yet while Marshall's film obviously exploits several cornerstones of Scotland's traditional cinematic depiction, it is less certain that the movie does so in order to discourse exclusively (or even primarily) upon ideas of nationally specific history, identity, or society.

For instance, although *Dog Soldiers* pitches Cooper's working-class Scottish decency against Ryan's upper-class English depravity from the film's first moments, it could be argued that the idea of fundamentally incompatible British national identities is not a thesis that viewers are subsequently asked to consider to any significant or serious extent. Cooper consistently refuses to accord *any* degree of wider symbolic meaning, ethnically inflected or otherwise, to his lycanthropic foes. He describes them as 'the enemy, simple as that,' and proposes that 'what they may or may not be does not affect our immediate situation one bit.' Such matter-of-factness reflects Neil Marshall's insistence that the werewolves be seen not as national or nationalist symbols, but as 'just another enemy, like Nazis or terrorists, that this platoon... must contend with' (Jones 2002, 40; see also Walters 2002). Moreover, when Cooper *does* ascribe some kind of wider context to the threat that Ryan poses, he foregrounds issues of class identities and allegiances, rather than national equivalents. The regional diversity of Cooper's team suggests a carefully cultivated range of congruent British working-class cultures (central belt Scottish, Tyneside, Cockney) united, amongst other things, by antipathy towards the metropolitan froideur personified by Ryan. Cooper underscores his understanding of, and identification with, that dividing line when he tells the Major that, 'given the choice of taking orders from a toffee-nosed twat like you and slogging it out with these guys, I'll take the underdogs any time.'

For such reasons, it is perhaps more accurate to understand *Dog Soldiers'* exploitation of Scottish cinematic stereotype not as an end in itself, but as one constituent part within a broader process of cheerfully catholic popular cultural quotation which the film engages in, 'concentrat[ing] on pleasing viewers willing to go along with its knowing intertextuality' (Hantke 2010, 712). As one contemporary reviewer notes, *Dog Soldiers* 'plays out like a cross between *The Howling* [Joe Dante, USA, 1981], *Aliens* [James Cameron, USA/GB, 1986], and *Evil Dead II* [Sam Raimi, USA, 1987]... also referenc[ing]... everything from *The Matrix* [Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, USA/Aus, 1999] to *Zabriskie Point* [Michelangelo Antonioni, USA, 1970]' (Michael 2003). Consider, for instance, the

film's arch non-depiction of squaddie Spoon (Darren Morfitt)'s demise at the werewolves' talons. After a close-up of the victim's helpless, blood-covered visage held inches away from his killer's slavering fangs, the succeeding coup de grace occurs off-screen. Marshall cuts instead to an image of animal eyes (belonging to the farmhouse dog, Sam) that witness the carnage viewers hear but do not see. This seems like a clear homage to the celebrated introduction of the implacably destructive instincts and abilities of the adult xenomorph in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (Ridley Scott, USA/GB, 1979). In that classic science-fiction horror, a series of excruciating close-ups brings helpless *Nostramo* crew member Brett (Harry Dean Stanton) face-to-face with his nemesis, before cutting away to a memorable shot of the ship's cat, Jones, watching Brett's grisly end. Moreover, the *Alien* reference extends comfortably beyond the limits of a single visual in-joke. *Dog Soldiers* constructs its lycanthropes, like the *Alien* series' xenomorphs, are near-indestructible antagonists, vulnerable to immolation only. Cooper's carefully emphasised attachment to Sam throughout the narrative recalls that of *Alien's* Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) to Jones: in both movies, the central protagonist's sentimental bond with a domestic animal saves them from death at the hands of an untameable one. More generally still, Ryan's exposition of the state conspiracy that forms the backdrop to *Dog Soldiers'* narrative (innocent low-level state employees deliberately sacrificed by scruple-free vested political and corporate interests keen to develop new military technologies) self-consciously regurgitates that which defines the *Alien* franchise to date. The scene in question also manages to slyly underscore Ryan's inhumanity by aligning him with the figure of *Alien's* treacherous android, Ash (Ian Holm). Both characters play out near-identical confessional scenes within their respective narratives; both are then immediately divested of the final remnants of human outward appearance – Ash is switched off by the *Nostramo* crew, Ryan transmogrifies into a beast.

More generally, it might also be productive to contextualise Marshall's debut feature (and, indeed, his two subsequent Scottish-set movies) as examples of a cinematic sub-genre frequently designated as 'rural horror'. The tradition in question stems from foundational 1970s low-budget US exploitation flicks such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, USA, 1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, USA, 1977) and has by the early twenty-first-century grown to incorporate a cosmopolitan range of nationally specific variants, such as the Australian Outback-set *Wolf Creek* (Greg Mclean, Aus, 2005). The work of David Bell (1997, 2006) is of particular significance here. His acute identification of the way in which physically remote, non-urban settings are typically constructed within the rural horror cycle – 'embod[ying] both desire (through notions of authenticity, for example) and dread (figured in notions of backwardness, etc.)' (2006, 151) functions as a useful description of the dominant way in which Marshall's films construct their Scottish setting. This in turn offers a salutary reminder of the extent to which, despite the movie's gleeful generic promiscuity, it is still appropriate to acknowledge and analyse *Dog Soldiers'* pronounced reiteration of traditional cinematic caricatures of all things Caledonian, not least because that representational territory comes much more explicitly to the fore in Marshall's subsequent Scottish-set movies, *Doomsday* and *Centurion*. Those works are also constructed around central incoming protagonists who share, and are thus endangered by, English scientist Megan's quasi-ethnographic fascination with a mythic northern Other. Too late, Megan learns that academic rigour ('for a whole year now, I've tracked these things, I've studied them, tried to understand them') offers scant protection against the perils of going native within her creator's celluloid Scotland: the young woman's unhappy fate is to degenerate into that which she previously sought to document. As we shall see, a

similar end awaits *Doomsday*'s epidemiologist Kane (Malcolm McDowell), an English scientist who succumbs to fascistic fantasies of Celtic racial purity after being trapped in Scotland after the outbreak of the deadly viral pandemic that decimates the country.

Moreover, *Doomsday* and *Centurion* amplify *Dog Soldiers*' implied construction of Scotland as a physical and psychological space within which atavistic forms of resistance Enlightenment ideals of historical progress and human perfectibility flourish. All three films build their respective plots around small incoming military teams at the service of national-cum-imperial cultures at the forefront of technological and cultural modernity. These isolated foreign bodies are forced to fight for survival in a savage Scotland that exemplifies, in the words of Sergeant Wells, the utterly hostile terrain that always exists 'behind enemy lines.' Megan speaks truer than she knows when, teetering on the cusp of lycanthropic transformation, she despairingly describes herself as 'out of time.' This, after all, is the doom of the native werewolf family that has co-opted her into their ranks. Physically near-indestructible and condemned to regress to animalistic savagery at every full moon, that community has, to quote Megan, 'lived in this glen for centuries.' Such endless indigenous recursion contrasts starkly with the incoming soldiers' civilised desire to regiment and react rationally to the ceaseless progression of chronological and cultural time: synchronising watches, allocating time-based tasks, trying to run the clock down to the dawn that will free them from their foes' overwhelming power.

Finally, *Dog Soldiers* also suggests the extent to which its creator's Scottish-set cinema uses the country's traditional filmic representation as a vehicle through which to toy with volatile discourses of racial and ethnic identity much more seriously and substantially than the films might often like to think. As noted above, Marshall's debut feature tries to avoid delineating explicit ideological conflicts between present-day Scottish and English identities. More generally, it also strives to depict the contemporary resonance of the historic imperial and militaristic strains underpinning many discourses of Britishness as a mere matter of jokey popular cultural referencing and riffing. Spoon's invocation of the late-nineteenth-century Battle of Rorke's Drift – 'A hundred men of heart making a desperate stand against ten thousand Zulu warriors. Outnumbered, surrounded, staring death in the face but not flinching for a moment: balls of British steel' – is rendered relatively innocuous on a surface level. It is presented as the self-sustaining hyperbole of a naïve but courageous young man dealing with an unenviable predicament and as another example of the ironic and extensive popular cinematic quotation that suffuses *Dog Soldiers*. Lead actor Sean Pertwee, for example, described the movie as 'Zulu [Cy Endfield, GB, 1964] meets werewolves' (Jones 2002, 41) in one promotional interview. That said, however, the racial/colonial overtones of Spoon's parallel underscore the multiple (and interdependent) forms of Othering which support *Dog Soldiers*' fundamentally tribal politics of collective identity. Literally speaking, the squaddies are destroyed by monsters. More telling, though, is the fact that the film's narrative forces serial encounters, unlooked-for and/or unwanted, with various forms of difference – class (Ryan), national culture (the Scottish lycanthropes), gender (Megan) – upon its central protagonists. These meetings endanger the soldiers and then seal their doom. A similar ideological tension can be discerned within *Doomsday* and *Centurion*. On one hand, both films try to distance themselves from theories of racial and ethnic

superiority (imperial Rome's self-proclaimed civilising mission in *Centurion*) or purity (Kane's desire to create a quasi-medieval, hermetically sealed ethnic *Volk* in *Doomsday*). But on the other, both movies simultaneously depict their imagined Scottish cultures and identities as sub-human entities, phenomena that more civilised outside forces understandably seek to domesticate or, if necessary, extirpate.

Doomsday

The strong international commercial performance of *Dog Soldiers* and Marshall's second feature, the subterranean monster movie *The Descent* (Kay 2006), enabled the filmmaker to turn his third, *Doomsday*, into a markedly more expensive – and thus, visually expansive – exploitation of traditional Scottish cinematic stereotype. For the first time in his career, Marshall was backed by mainstream American film industry finance, provided in part by the genre production arm of major US studio Universal Pictures (Adler 2007). The director thus targeted his latest project squarely at audiences on either side of the Atlantic, emphasising both its 'Scottish accents, old *Top of the Pops* soundtrack and Tennent's Lager jokes' and a desire 'to homage such favourite '80s movies as *Escape from New York* [John Carpenter, USA/GB, 1981] and *The Road Warrior* [George Miller, Aus, 1981]' (Jones 2008, 76-78).

In *Doomsday*'s consequently outlandish imagining of Caledonian apocalypse and its aftermath, a catastrophic pandemic, popularly named the Reaper virus, decimates Glasgow and then the rest of Scotland in early 2008. As the Westminster government closes all borders and erects a hi-tech successor to Hadrian's Wall, thus leaving the UK's northernmost nation to die, the mother of Eden Sinclair (Rhona Mitra) manages to smuggle her infant daughter onto a departing Army airlift. Twenty-seven years later, Sinclair is a mentally scarred but precociously successful officer within the military police force that struggles to maintain order within the decaying capital of an overcrowded, internationally ostracised British state. When the Reaper virus re-emerges in central London's teeming slums, the Prime Minister (Alexander Siddig) and his omnipotent chief advisor, Canaris (David O'Hara), charge Police Chief Nelson (Bob Hoskins) with identifying the leader for a covert task force authorised to enter Scotland in search of a cure. The government has been aware for several years of survivors north of the border, and thus reasons that a vaccine might be obtained through contact with these people. Sinclair and a capable deputy, Norton (Adrian Lester), lead the team north only to encounter a quite literally bloodthirsty welcome. Glasgow has been overrun by a savage tribe that fuses cyberpunk aesthetics with cannibalistic eating habits. This group kills most, and eats one, of Sinclair's colleagues. Escaping further north in search of Kane, a brilliant epidemiologist stranded in Scotland by the Reaper outbreak, Sinclair discovers that the scientist has installed himself as the despotic leader of a bizarre medievalist cult that has chosen to re-inhabit the social and physical structures of the early Middle Ages, converting a Highland castle into its communal abode. Fleeing for her life with Kane's daughter, Cally (Myanna Buring), Sinclair manages to deliver the latter (who is immune to the Reaper virus) into Canaris' hands. But she refuses to return south of the border, instead passing Nelson recorded footage of a conversation in which Canaris coldly reveals his intention to delay the development of an anti-viral vaccine in order to ease Britain's chronic overpopulation. At the film's very end, Sinclair seems to have gone native: she

returns in triumph to Glasgow, showing the native savages the decapitated head of their previous leader, Kane's estranged son Sol (Craig Conway), in an apparent prelude to assuming his forcibly vacated place.

As the above suggests, *Doomsday* strains credulity on multiple fronts. Far more important than the flagrantly implausible nature of the film's narrative, however, is the dangerously garbled nature of its ethnic and racial politics. Granted, *Doomsday* takes explicit pains to identify and abjure the inhumane proclivities of authoritarian political institutions and ideologies built upon essentialist, obsessively self-protective discourses of race and ethnicity. Recalling *Dog Soldiers'* preferred ideation of Britishness as a cooperative amalgam of different regional cultures and traditions, *Doomsday* presents the UK government's ruthless decision to abandon Scotland's population to a painful and protracted death as an act that carries profoundly dystopian consequences in tow. Nearly three decades on from the draconian official response to the original Reaper outbreak, a physically and politically diminished United Kingdom has emerged. A number of arch details suggest this idea: the Prime Minister's surname (Hatcher) truncates that of a famous late-twentieth-century predecessor, while a new national flag (the Union Jack divested of its St Andrews Cross background) prominently adorns the accoutrements of the nation's new military police force, the euphemistically named Department of Domestic Security. Matters are no better north of the border. Kane has succumbed to a fascistic perversion of Darwinian thought, asserting of his medieval micro-kingdom that, 'what we've built here from the ashes is pure blood – unaffected by the outside world... we have prevailed here not because of science, but through natural selection.' His community's faux-Celtic insignia, a tattoo of which covers Sol's entire back, is a curvilinear near relation of the partitioned UK's new flag: more (Pict)uresque in aesthetic terms, but no less ugly in ideological equivalents.

Yet despite all this, *Doomsday* only *appears* to align itself with the rationalist, non-racial ideals advanced by the younger Kane, presumably in one of the many radio communications that viewers are told the scientist made with London in the immediate aftermath of Scotland's quarantining three decades earlier. Kane's voiceover narration that accompanies the film's opening titles asserts that 'a virus doesn't choose a time and place: it doesn't hate or even care; it just happens.' But within the succeeding narrative, a wealth of visual details and thematic motifs suggest an antithetical approach to questions of racial and ethnic hybridity, one that proves disturbingly akin to the older Kane's paranoid obsession with 'cleans[ing]' the biological and cultural 'impurity' that he has in time come to see as the central threat to the sustainable existence of any collective human unit. Multiculturalism and miscegenation, rather than any made-up medical malaise, are what *Doomsday* deems the real danger confronting contemporary civilisation, British or otherwise. This idea is even suggested at the level of casting decisions: Britain's craven Prime Minister is played by an actor of Sudanese origin, while Rhona Mitra, who acts the part of uncontrollable arm of the state Sinclair, is of mixed English and Indian descent.

But *Doomsday* also advances the insidious insinuation of darkness as a threat to British bodies (and the British body politic) in several other ways. The structuring logic underpinning the film's imagined proximate future, for example, suggests that while the fascistic actions of Hatcher, Canaris, and Kane may be morally indefensible, they are pragmatically inarguable. Based on what viewers are shown of Britain 2035, it is difficult to demur about Canaris' conclusion that the existential crisis gripping the country is 'our fault... too many people crammed into ghettos so tight they can hardly move... the perfect breeding ground for a virus to take place.' Elsewhere, the movie seems to go to out of its way to conflate one binary opposition, between Caucasian and non-Caucasian ethnicities, with another, between civilised and savage human cultures and identities. The consistent visual prominence of non-white extras – in part a consequence of the fact that the greater part of *Doomsday* was, for financial reasons, shot in South Africa, not Scotland (Kay 2007) – is one key vehicle through which that dubious equation is made. The very first shot of Sol's marauding henchmen wreaking havoc in Glasgow's city centre, for instance, is of a murderous lone black assailant. More emphatic yet is the elaborate choreography of the film's main set-piece sequence: a grotesque carnival of creolised Caledonia during which Sol has one of Sinclair's team, Dr Talbot (Sean Pertwee), roasted alive in order to feed a mob of hungry henchmen. One of the two female pole dancers who gyrate onstage as Sol presides over this barbaric ritual is of Asian ethnic origin; the first of a troupe of kilted cancan dancers that runs out to perform behind their leader is black; and, more gratuitously still, consciously puerile special-effects shots of Talbot's agony as he burns are intercut with the orgasmic spasms of a PVC-clad gimp that Sol keeps (for reasons unspecified) as a kind of trophy pet. Throughout this lurid extravaganza, the various processes by which white skin can be turned black (whether literally or figuratively speaking) are all figured as forms of inhuman perversion. In more granular terms still, a shot-by-shot analysis of the sequence in question reveals that, of the fifteen medium-frame shots of crowd reaction given during Sol's stage entrance, no fewer than ten mix black faces with white. Moreover, many of edits that end these fleeting images occur close to the point that Marshall's fast-moving camera manoeuvres a non-white face into the centre of the frame.

Viewed in this context, Sinclair's terse one-liner when she discovers the abandoned black sports car that enables her escape from Kane's clutches ('nice colour: I'll take it') represents more than just the kind of would-be aphoristic inanity that peppers big-budget action movies aimed squarely at a young adult male demographic. After all, *Doomsday*'s lead female protagonist personifies, and is shown to be passionate about, the dangerous allure of darkness in more ways than one. In addition to actor Rhona Mitra's own ethnic background, we might also note her character's burgeoning attraction to her black subordinate, Norton – a possible relationship that the film takes care to thwart by having the latter killed by Kane's troops. Sinclair might also be seen as an ethnic cuckoo in the post-partition British nest, a semi-detached and –deranged Caledonian lethal weapon of the kind that the UK authorities hoped to capture and tame in *Dog Soldiers*. Her final decision to remain in post-apocalyptic Scotland can be rationalised in various ways. In prosaic terms, it simply represents the logical culmination of a deep-seated ennui already afflicting the character at the narrative's outset: 'Whatever happened to a good cause?' Sinclair asks Nelson during their very first conversation. Alternatively, it might be read as *Doomsday*'s sub- or semi-conscious acknowledgement of the political instability and unpredictability set in train by the ongoing devolution of the British state

since 1997, an 'English national nightmare... about what might be happening beyond the border, and moreover what might be happening unnoticed within the very centre itself' (MacDonald 2011, 48).

But Sinclair's remaining in the devastated north could also be interpreted in yet another way again. That action arguably represents the character's accurate and candid self-acknowledgement of her inherently uncivilised (and uncivilisable) Scottish identity. Neil Marshall, for instance, appeared to argue that his lead protagonist is depressed because deracinated, 'a product of the [post-partition British] system in which she grew up, but she has a different history... [the film's narrative is that of] her homecoming, really' (Rogue Pictures 2008). Ethnically loaded parallels between Sinclair and the Scottish savages she encounters once over the border thus abound. Like Sol and his goons, she is scruple-free and irredeemably contemptuous of official authority. Like them, she has also assumed a cyborgian form that might be understood as post- or semi-human, never mind post- or semi-British. Sinclair sports a detachable bionic eye, replacing the biological one that she lost as a child during the chaotic firefight in which British troops first sealed the Scotland-England border; Sol's tribe augment their heads with a diverse range of fetishistic piercings and jewellery. Her choice to stay in Scotland and assume Sol's place is, therefore, entirely congruent with Kane's demented belief that any sustainable human community is defined by the inward-looking and –identifying task of 'keeping ourselves to ourselves.' In this sense, the fact that the barrier built to isolate post-Reaper virus Scotland follows (as Kane's introductory voiceover informs viewers) the defensive line first traced by Hadrian's Wall nearly two millennia before is appropriate rather than accidental. *Doomsday* presents the fascistic and sadomasochistic savagery that defines its imagined Scotland as an ancestral collective psychosis. The latter is reborn from, as opposed to being released for the first time by, the ravages of the Reaper virus. Little wonder that the first Scottish accent heard on the film's soundtrack is that of a home-grown prophet of doom who proclaims that 'this is the end of the world.' For, in social evolutionary terms, this is just what the movie caricatures Scotland's allegedly timeless national identity as.

Centurion

Marshall's fourth feature, *Centurion*, further exploits the stereotypes of nation that inform *Dog Soldiers* and *Doomsday*. Here, yet again, Scotland functions as the implacably hostile northern border marking the physical and philosophical limits of two interdependent phenomena: the state of modernity on one hand, and the modern nation state on the other. Indeed, the narrative's starting point, the historical myth of the Roman Ninth Legion's mysterious disappearance while on manoeuvres in second-century Caledonia points to the remarkable historical pervasion and persistence of the Scottish stereotype most frequently encountered within mainstream cinema. On one hand, one might note the near-contemporaneous theatrical release of another film exploring the Ninth's possible fate, *The Eagle* (Kevin Macdonald, GB/USA, 2011); on the other, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the first recorded construction – and ideological exploitation – of the idea of Scotland as the civilised world's northern limit dates from the period in which *Centurion* is set, in the account of the first-century Battle of Mons Graupius provided by the Roman historian Tacitus in his biographical work, *Agricola* (c. 98AD) (Clarke 2001). As we shall see, Marshall's movie attempts to

ape something of both the representational content and the rhetorical elevation of such classical precedents.

Centurion is set in the year 117AD. A written prologue informs viewers that the Roman Empire's 'furthest, most untamed frontier was northern Britain.' There, the native Picts, astonishingly impervious inhabitants of an 'unforgiving land,' have 'used guerrilla tactics and the landscape to their advantage,' stopping Rome's invasion of Britain in its tracks. Imperial impotence immediately assumes human form in the figure of Centurion Quintus Dias (Michael Fassbender) stumbling half-naked through snow, flying from an unseen foe. Flashbacks then show the Picts' destruction of the Roman border outpost where Quintus was previously based. He is taken north for torture and interrogation alive by the Pict leader, Gorlacon (Ulrich Thomsen). Meanwhile, Agricola (Paul Freeman), the Roman Governor of Britain, orders his most senior General, Titus Virilus (Dominic West), to lead the Ninth Legion north into Caledonia and crush Gorlacon's resistance permanently. The Ninth are to be aided in that task by the expert guidance of Etain (Olga Kurylenko), a mute Pictish scout. Quintus, who escapes from Gorlacon, is found by the advancing Ninth. But the legion is then decimated by an army of Picts: Etain is a double agent who deliberately leads the Romans into Gorlacon's trap. Assuming command of a small band of survivors, Quintus unsuccessfully attempts to rescue Virilus from the Picts' main base. Hotly pursued by Etain and her execution squad, the Romans then try to cross back over into imperial territory. However, a combination of bad luck, treachery, and Etain's expertise sees only Quintus surviving the journey south to the new defensive wall being built on the orders of Emperor Hadrian. There, he finds himself subject to an assassination attempt by Agricola, who cannot countenance the political humiliation that widespread knowledge of the Ninth's defeat would create. Escaping death one final time, Quintus rides back north into Caledonia, which he now describes as 'where I belong', in order to be with Arianne (Imogen Potts), an attractive young Pictish woman who earlier helped him and his comrades during their desperate flight.

Like *Dog Soldiers* (if not *Doomsday*), *Centurion's* extensive exploitation of entrenched cultural stereotypes of Scotland is not matched by any explicit desire to utilise these as a vehicle through which to explore the contemporary nation's contested and uncertain place within an increasingly fragile-looking unitary British state. Although an occasional commentator has noted the potential resonance of *Centurion's* historical inspiration in this regard (Russell 2011), the movie's modern-day interests tend more towards the geopolitical than the local. The Afghanistan and Iraq Wars seem much more to the front of the minds of *Centurion's* makers and those who reviewed its original theatrical release (see, for example, Hoyle 2009; Felperin 2010; Trilling 2010). Neil Marshall foregrounded his narrative's 'obvious parallels with what's going on in the world today... a superpower marching into essentially what it a Third World country and being beaten in a kind of guerrilla warfare' (Magnolia Pictures, 2010, 12). Lead actor Michael Fassbender concurred, noting how, 'I guess you can always make modern-day parallels, to the occupation in Iraq... it's interesting when you take it out of our timeframe... people are more likely to take it on board than a film about Iraq that's too close to the bone' (Pierce 2009, 142). Thus, *Centurion* depicts the individual (Quintus) and institutional (Agricola) disillusionment created when a technologically and militarily advanced

superpower finds itself bogged down in a seemingly endless war of attrition with a less well-equipped, but boundlessly ruthless (because radicalised), foe. The film suggests that when one culture systematically dehumanises another in order to legitimise the prosecution of a campaign of colonisation, any failure to achieve that latter goal necessarily provokes a profound crisis of psychological, as well as political, self-confidence.

Recurring visual motifs of physical elevation form the primary vehicle through which these ideas are developed and advanced. The set-piece battle scene depicting the Ninth's destruction is punctuated with multiple high-angle shots looking down upon Roman troops marching towards death through a seemingly deserted valley. More expressively and explicitly, Roman protagonists' verbal mention or mental visions of Etain usually provoke an immediate dissolve to spectacular aerial fast tracks over expansive mountain-and-forest-filled Scottish vistas. The transitions between shots that accompany Agricola's promise to Virilus that Etain 'will guide you into the mountains,' and Quintus' vision of his pursuer's scream of triumph (which he seems to hear, despite being several miles distant from its physical source) after she executes Virilus are representative examples here. These recurrent visual flights over austere northern wilderness connote several ideas at once. First, they act as a visual pun, underlining the fact that Quintus and his fellow survivors are hunted men who find themselves in something over their heads after being separated from various forms of protection afforded by individual identification with the Roman imperial principle. Secondly, the images in question also associate Etain – and, by implication, the indigenous culture and identity that she represents – with a familiar Highland iconography of mountain and flood. Etain's mastery of the physical landscape stems from the remarkable adroitness with which she reads and reacts to the challenges and opportunities that native Nature poses. In this way, and as Sam McCurdy, *Centurion's* Director of Photography, notes, the topography of Highland Scotland is itself constructed as a native antagonist as formidable as the Romans' female pursuer: 'the Scottish landscape was always going to be a character in the film... [the invaders] are at odds with the land as much as they are with the Picts' (Manders 2010, 76). At different junctures Quintus and Virilus therefore compare Etain to a wolf, utterances that recall the multiple forms of Othering performed upon the physical bodies and ethnic identities of *Dog Soldiers* and *Doomsday's* female protagonists. But the physically elevated – and thus, avian – nature of most of *Centurion's* landscape shots suggests that a better zoomorphic comparison between that character and a native animal species would involve the Golden Eagle. After all, that connection completes the film's calculated humiliation of imperial hubris, stressing as it does the abject Other's temporary capture of power and its supporting iconography during the narrative's course. Virilus' dying sight is the Ninth's standard, a richly gilded imperial eagle, sent up in flames by his triumphant enemies.

Finally, however, *Centurion* also uses the motif of physical elevation to advance an idea that possession of the high ground can be used as a metaphor for individual moral principle (indeed, for individualism *as* a moral principle), rather than simply representing a timeworn principle of military strategy. As the narrative progresses, rapidly declining degrees of altitude connote not only Quintus' southward journey from Highlands to Lowlands, but also his increasing estrangement from the imperial ideology with which he initially identified. Quintus' successive physical ordeals and

experiences of betrayal lead him to the conclusion that self-abnegation in the service of any nationalist or imperialist set of political principles – *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* – is a delusive act. His voiceover narration that accompanies images of the massacred corpses of the Ninth reflects upon the fact that, ‘In the chaos of battle... it’s easy to turn to the gods for salvation. But it’s soldiers who do the fighting... and the gods never get their feet wet.’ Such incipient disengagement from the Roman project is subsequently confirmed by Quintus’ romantically charged meeting with Arianne, a woman who refuses to countenance any form of unthinking tribal identification whatsoever, asserting instead that, ‘I owe allegiance to no man, but to whom I choose.’ This encounter, educative and erotic in equal measure, seals the personal transformation within Quintus even before he discovers that Agricola is perfectly willing to sacrifice his underlings’ lives in order to protect the Roman state’s interests. Tellingly, sequences that depict Quintus and Arianne’s burgeoning relationship afford the former character much more modest levels of physical elevation than those he achieved during the film’s earlier Highland-set sections. He stands either on a small knoll in front of Arianne’s dwelling or on the slightly raised bank of the adjacent river in which she forages for food. This coming down to earth is both figurative and physical: by *Centurion*’s end, Quintus exchanges overblown ideals of the imperial civilising mission for more concrete and humane aspirations towards domestic fulfilment.

Conclusion

Centurion is, like all of Neil Marshall’s Scottish-set films, a markedly paradoxical entity. This director’s celluloid Caledonias are unapologetically flagrant in their adoption and exploitation of the most historically familiar and influential cinematic and popular cultural stereotypes of Scotland. As a consequence, the movies in question help to illustrate the existence and complex nature of a phenomenon that David Martin-Jones perceptively identifies as an increasingly prominent aspect of Scotland’s relationship with contemporary global film culture. This involves ‘the different identities on offer in the various fantasy Scotlands created by filmmakers from around the world’ (2009: 1) over the past two decades or so. But at the same time, Marshall’s Scottish trilogy simultaneously seeks to downplay both the seriousness and extent of its engagement with questions of local cultural specificity. The films in question refuse, by and large, to tackle questions of multiple Scottish cultures and identities in a substantive manner. *Doomsday*’s choice to incorporate distinct urban and rural variants of post-apocalyptic Scotland, for instance, seems little more than a commercially calculating attempt to offer credulous viewers two grotesque freak shows for the price of one. Elsewhere, *Centurion* cheerfully conflates tribal identity (Etain’s adoptive Pictish community) with that of Caledonia/Scotland as a whole. Moreover, it should also be acknowledged that Marshall’s Scottish-set work undeniably manages to encompass, however imperfectly or problematically, a varied range of sub- and supra-national thematic concerns. As well as constituting a legitimate critical goal in its own right, understanding these particular films in the manner set out immediately above also sets a useful methodological precedent for Scottish cinema criticism more generally. That scholarly tradition has, in the present writer’s view at least, laboured under a degree of analytical myopia in the three decades since its emergence in the early 1980s with the *Scotch Reels* initiative (see McArthur 1982). A wholly understandable – and intrinsically valuable – collective investment in tracing the ways in which Scottish-set films construct images of national identity and society has often prevented critics from paying proper attention to many important Scottish films and

filmmakers' explorations of ideas and experiences that resonate far beyond a single set of territorial borders. The received scholarly wisdom surrounding the career of writer/director Bill Forsyth is perhaps the most acute example of a one-sided collective critical agenda's long-term consequences (Murray 2011). Wishing to analyse certain cinematic works because they speak about Scotland is one thing; making Scotland speak for those works in their entirety is quite another.

Finally, there is one last important paradox to note about Neil Marshall's delirious big-screen visions of Scotland. This is the extent to which the director's movies ask their viewers to do as they say, and not as they do. Perhaps the most consistent and readily discernible line of ideological argument within *Dog Soldiers*, *Doomsday*, and *Centurion* involves the films' attempted sceptical critique of the validity of individuals' investment within *any* form of collective identity that is dependent upon the officially sanctioned rituals and realpolitik of nation states. Yet in pursuing this potentially laudable aim, the movies are heavily dependent upon one particular form of national essentialism that therefore remains untouched and above criticism. The discourse in question is that which constructs Scotland and Scottishness as an ahistorical antagonist to, and/or antidote for, the hubris, hypocrisy, and discontent that characterise the wider modern world beyond the country's southern border. In this regard, Marshall's work offers a twenty-first-century exemplification of an inconvenient truth that has long lain at the heart of Scotland's relationship with popular cinema: Scottish-set films that travel north in narrative terms often find themselves heading south in ideological equivalents.

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