Pandemic Subversions: the rise of the Cybermen

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Abstract

This article reflects on recent developments in the author's fine art research project, *Monsters and Margins*. The imposing of lockdown restrictions in 2020 initiated a shift in the artist's practice, resulting in him spray painting and projecting Doctor Who villains onto the Brutalist architecture of the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge. The author will demonstrate the influence of literature and philosophy on his artistic practice, drawing upon the work of Robert Smithson, J.G. Ballard, Iain Sinclair and, most pertinently, Mark Fisher, as he narrates the evolution of his understanding of hauntology and psycho-geography through progressing experiments. This leads to the unearthing of an anti-capitalist political stance in the work, enflamed by the pandemic's highlighting of poor governance and society's unsustainable consumerism and inequalities.

Introduction: monsters and margins

'Monsters and margins' is the title of my research project, registered on the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art programme at UEL. Through it I aim to examine the role and construction of monsters – the figures of otherness that reflect our cultural and personal concerns, and their connection to wildernesses and wastelands – landscapes at the periphery of, or between, places. Aiming to argue a symbiotic relationship between monsters and margins, the latter stages of my research have fostered a political, anti-capitalist stance – a development that this article aims to track and discuss. As my methodology is led by the making of artwork, my writing style comprises of a hybrid between academic and artistic approaches, using a mixture of theoretical writings and personal reflection to analyse and develop my creative practice. This article charts the adaptation and evolution of my research through the restrictions and opportunities posed by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. I will introduce and present recent work made, reflecting on how it has advanced my understanding of both the monsters (Cybermen in particular) and the marginal landscapes that feature in my projects.

The first section, 'Pandemic subversions', outlines the circumstances, problems and solutions through which this body of research germinated. I chart early forms that this series of work took and how they evolved, introducing the main artistic and theoretical influences surrounding the project: Iain Sinclair, J.G. Ballard and Robert Smithson. The second section, 'The QE II Bridge', presents a key artwork in my research – an essay of photographs and self-reflective writing – that documents a walk to the foundations of the Dartford Crossing, resulting in the application of two spray-painted Cybermen to one of the bridge supports. The third section, 'Robots from a future passed', analyses this piece through the lenses of psycho-geography and hauntology, introducing the writing of Mark Fisher to examine the temporal disruption evident in the work, while connecting the positions of Sinclair, Ballard and Smithson in its creation. The fourth section, 'The rise of the Cybermen', documents the practice-based developments that followed, including large-scale site-specific projections, that allow emerging political concerns in the work to be addressed through Mark Fisher's hauntological notion of 'Capitalist Realism' and the underlying political agendas of psycho-geographical practice. I conclude the article by summarising how this body of work has furthered my understanding of both monsters and margins; through a balance of creative practice, theoretical and literary study, an environment is created where the researcher's understanding and ability in each of these areas can benefit. I track how such an environment, alongside pandemic restrictions, unearthed deep political frustrations in my own character and beliefs that now form a part of my artistic practice and research.

I hope that this article, in addition to logging the developments in my research over an extended period of restrictions and hardship, is also testament to the resilience of creative practice and its ability to adapt and grow in unstable and challenging conditions; that out of bleakness, deprivation and anxiety, hope and change is always possible.

Pandemic subversions

March 2020: It felt inhumane to subject a tactile kinaesthetic like myself to the virtual amnesia of Zoom and Microsoft Teams, cramped with my wife and stepson in a two-bed flat, my modest income cut by the closure of studios, galleries and karate. I was used to the explorative expanse of print workshops, filled with old-fashioned equipment and materials – the smell of ink, the weight of the press wheel. I feared not only for my mental health, but physically my body was suffering – I wasn't designed to stay still, sedentary – a damaged disc in my lower back ached

and threatened further injury; walking was the cure. I walked for the permitted hour every day, exploring beyond the manicured lawns and polished SUVs of West Thurrock's commuter settlements, to the wasteland, the verges (stiffer grass, burnt out joyrides), to the road and the river. This felt like an opportunity to reconnect with the margins of Essex – a sense of place was important to my research, but artists can often get comfortable in a studio routine – if anything, lockdown kicked me out of a habit, back into the landscape.

A13, M25 and Thames became repeated routes and destinations. As I found myself in increasingly hostile territory (roaring lorries, unforgiving tides), I developed an affinity for the art and writing of Robert Smithson[3]. Here was an artist who went out to the edge-lands and made things happen (a coiling jetty, an avalanche of glue) pushing himself physically and mentally with each piece: 'aesthetic experience could be an important experience only when it is risky and dangerous' (Smithson in Tsai, 1991, p. 96). Through these roaming journeys, I found a fresh appreciation and curiosity for the roadsides and river paths I discovered. Bleak and neglected landscapes that, although almost always deserted, held traces of passing outlaws and outsiders: fly-tipping, fire-pits, graffiti. The bold subversion of spray paint attracted me – I was frustrated, wanted to make a point, leave a mark – a potential new practice revealed itself: a knowledge of screen-printing and paper stencils, connections to skateboarding culture, everyone was hiding indoors, wearing masks was normal, available and affordable materials: card, scalpel, tape…

Through a series of risky dawns and dusks, I ventured down footpaths, through fields, along the carriageway – the destination, a previously spotted concrete pillar or corrugated shipping container – vagrant surfaces primed for the presence of monsters. As I sprayed through hand-cut stencils, my earlier research of prints and depictions was re-born in a new, primal reality and I felt potential in this hinterland studio: 'it was somewhere to cook the future, a rogue laboratory in which to undertake high-risk experiments' (Sinclair 2004, p. 56). Early pandemic subversions included Michael Myers (*Halloween*, Carpenter, 1978) looking out from a bridge support of the A13, Pennywise (*IT*, King, 1986) adorning the pillars supporting a section of the M25 and Leatherface (*The Texas chainsaw massacre*, Hooper, 1974) patrolling the scrubland behind Billericay football stadium. While these received encouragement and praise from my

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[3] Robert Smithson was an American artist who was influential in the 1960s -70s Land Art movement. He was attracted to making interventions in landscapes on the industrial fringes of towns and cities and held a fascination for the way these were affected by time and entropy. See 'Spiral Jetty' (1970) and 'Glue Pour' (1969) for further information on the artworks mentioned briefly above.

supervisory team and fellow research students, I was left underwhelmed by the modestly sized Jpegs documenting these interventions, nervously and hurriedly shot with the camera built into my phone. I wanted to communicate the creative fulfilment that these explorations of the margins offered me in a time of worry and deprivation; there was something special about these sites and the journeys between them, and a deeply embedded sense of frustration in the defacing of neglected surfaces with cheap spray paint – concerns my developing research had to unearth. Much was still missing from the records of my adventures, the tacit bubbling of memories with every step: childhood play in the woods and fields behind my parents' house, glimpses of the late-night films I was not supposed to watch (recorded on VHS), skateboarding expeditions to deserted drainage ditches and abandoned warehouses. My volatile, lockdown-starved imagination would mould and merge these splinters of my past into new ideas, narratives and potential future projects, while anticipation (and fear of getting caught) ballooned as destinations approached. It became clear that the walk itself was crucial to the practice. Rebecca Solnit (2001) notes that 'the rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it' (pp. 5-6). My active lifestyle of weekly karate and football matches – all currently suspended – craved something tactile, kinetic and thrilling to spark my brain, which was sorely languishing in an endless haze of video meetings and virtual seminars.

I became aware that I was walking on someone else's territory: Iain Sinclair traversed the Thames gateway in his 2004 novel *Dining on stones* and circumnavigated the M25 in *London orbital* (2002). I appreciated how his prose blurred between fact, memory and imagination, how he acknowledged these sites as margins between reality and fiction: 'In parts of the map that are not overwritten, worked out, everything bleeds into everything, sea and sky, truth and legend; defences are down […] We confess, we lie, we make up stories' (Sinclair, 2004, p. 171). Another author whom I had begun reading during my doctorate was J.G. Ballard; I had witnessed his characters become increasingly alienated, lost in the bizarre banality of overgrown traffic islands, multi-storey carparks and suburban real estate hugging the perimeter fencing of Heathrow airport – people in flight from reality. 'I think the suburbs are more interesting than people will let on. In the suburbs you find uncentred lives. The normal civic structures are not there. So that people have more freedom to explore their own imaginations, their own obsessions' (Ballard in Sinclair, 1999, p. 84). Ballard, like Sinclair, saw the

peripheries as places where imagination could fuse with reality – sites where monsters were made. Deeper study into Robert Smithson's oeuvre revealed a potential methodology for recording my adventures – three pieces stood out: *The crystal land* (1966), *The monuments of Passaic* (1967) and *Incidents of mirror-travel in the Yucatan* (1969), documenting the artist's expeditions and interventions through essays of reflective writing, often with accompanying images. I experimented with adopting this format in my next exploration.

The QE II Bridge

Through the influence of Smithson, Ballard and Sinclair, the following piece was created, documenting and reflecting on a six-mile walk taken along the Thames path to the foundations of the Dartford Crossing, accompanied by my father, on Sunday 8th November 2020.

Figure 1: Ralph Overill (2020) *The meeting point at Wouldham Road*. Photograph

I had arranged to meet with Dad at the end of Wouldham Road at 2pm on a dull Sunday afternoon, where we would follow the Thames path West until we reached the bridge that spanned the river between Essex and Kent. We had explored the path up to Proctor and Gamble on a previous adventure, but everything that came after was unexplored territory. In my blue *Radical Essex* bag I carried a bottle of water, my Ilford Sportsman camera and some cereal bars, an A3 portfolio in my other hand containing a paper stencil of a 1960s Cyberman. As a child, I had been raised on televised science fiction, and while I don't recall ever being scared by these lumbering automatons, they had stuck in my memory and intrigued my aesthetic

sensibilities as an artist, and so, the image had been traced, the card incised, (offcuts scattered over a cluttered living room floor) ready for an opportunity to deploy.

Figure 2: Doctor Who (1967) *The invasion*. Film still

I did not know if I would use the stencil – I had a curious fascination with the towering suspension bridge – and as we walked, my mind drifted West up the river and back in time, towards Blackfriars Bridge, as I remembered scenes of St Paul's Cathedral and central London being overtaken by the silver-suited robots – fragments of forgotten Dr Who episodes; the black-and-white Doctors: William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton.

Figure 3: Ralph Overill (2020) *Approaching the bridge*. Photograph

As the bridge loomed from misty distance into the foreground, I imagined residues of these metallic monsters, forced into the Thames by swipes of a sonic screwdriver, expunged by the current, half-buried in silt, now collecting, reforming at the foundations under the A282;

memories of a lost celluloid future clinging to reality – the space between Thurrock and Dartford.

Figure 4: Ralph Overill (2020) *Under the bridge*. Photograph

We were under the bridge. The pillars, more like walls, reached up vertiginously. Lorries traversing sections of reinforced concrete echoed like colliding asteroids in the space above.

Figure 5: Richard Overill (2020) *The gap*. Photograph

The first support was about 60 feet away; a span of wet mud edged by a verge of angular rocks on either side. I felt the urge to get across, reach this island and populate it with Dr Who villains. Dad seemed happy to wait – his knees would not let him follow. I clambered down onto the rocks; some wobbled and see-sawed as I tested them with my feet.

Figure 6: Ralph Overill (2020) *Wrong shoes*. Photograph

Wrong shoes. White leather K Swiss, half a size too big, donated by the father-in-law (only 2 miles down the path in Purfleet). I clutched the portfolio in one hand, rigging tape and spray paint in coat pockets. Bag relegated to watching with the old man. Had to travel light. I reached the mud, one foot sank and slipped laterally, Thames diarrhoea lapping my laces. Maybe I should come back another time with boots, what if I lose a shoe, get stuck, break an ankle in the rocks?

Figure 7: Ralph Overill (2020) *Previous hesitations*. Photographs

I remembered previous similar hesitations; slipping on the pebbled verge to the A13 bridge (feral children watching 20 feet below) or being spotted by a fisherman while preparing to spray red octopus tentacles over Grays' riverbank. Each time I had to push myself further – increasing danger, risk, but the rewards were great and the regrets, so far, had been none.

Figure 8: Ralph Overill (2020) *The rocks*. Photograph

The tide was out, Dad was watching eagerly, now or never. I slopped across, finding seaweed footholds, the silt was unforgiving, coating my tennis shoes, making them slippery for the rocks to come. Sharp, irregular, unpredictable. I crabbed and spidered up the leg-eating bank (decades of karate balance called upon). I reached the foundations of the QE II bridge.

Figure 9: Ralph Overill (2020) *Rise of the cybermen*. Photographs: Richard and Ralph Overill

The concrete was rough, sandy; flecked with decades of silt and tide wash, but the tape stuck, the spray paint adhered. The Cybermen rose out of the Thames; one, two …spray can ran empty. I looked back to Thurrock and Dad observing, along with a teenage couple who had decided to watch this afternoon entertainment.

Figure 10: Ralph Overill (2020) *Between*. Photograph: Richard Overill

I realised I was truly between: an outland, a non-place, floating in the margin, I was under the skin of the dividing line. The sound of the unreachable traffic stretched down to me, distorted, alien. Tide coming in – how long had I been out here? Dr Who playing tricks again; time and space out of joint – Cyberman fossils found in 2020 under the M25. Make it back to the Essex shore.

Figure 11: Ralph Overill (2020) *Thames Cybermen*. Photograph

Walking home, the reflections came, the adventures were becoming increasingly risky, the stakes (like suspended concrete) rising higher. I felt like a Ballardian character – on a collision course with incident like the protagonist in *Crash*. I had fallen between the carriageways into an under-land reminiscent of *Concrete Island*. I had traversed an estuarine world, in the process of being subsumed by a primordial ooze, a *Drowned World*. Smithson would have been proud of how I conquered the rocks, dodged the tide, to apply my art. I imagined Sinclair treading alongside Dad and I, narrating another pedestrian adventure. The fictions drained away as I returned to locked-down suburbia – a landscape of quarantine and isolation: empty streets, lit curtains concealing jabbering television screens. The pandemic had highlighted a world as alienating as any of Ballard's novels – perhaps this was the point. From now on, maybe I was destined to practise in the peripheries: the margins were manifest.

Robots from a future passed

The format of *The QE II Bridge* allowed me to articulate the experience of the adventure more fully, enabling me to analyse the previously tacit connections growing between mind and landscape in my practice. While I had decided to bring the Cyberman stencil with me on the walk, the site of its application and the fictional history around this intervention emerged during the event, as the Thames path encouraged a theme of temporal disruption to enter my writing. I recalled an episode of *Doctor Who* (*The invasion*, Camfield, 1967) first broadcast over 50 years ago, leading to my forming of a narrative where futuristic robots from the past were emerging from the river Thames to influence the present. The bleak, estuarine landscape of West Thurrock seemed to add to this dyschronia, as I experienced a loss of temporal awareness while under the bridge, to the point where the incoming tide threatened my return to shore. This confluence of past, present and future timelines, and my realisation of how the environment was affecting my thoughts and behaviour, led me to the research areas of hauntology and psycho-geography. The pandemic and ensuing government restrictions had threatened to limit my right to explore and create, propelling me into the spaces that fascinated me the most. At the same time, society's adoption of an increasingly virtualised existence of wi-fi-led interaction and entertainment had damaged my temporal perception and routines, leaving me to watch and re-watch my collection of horror and sci-fi movies at low-points through the days. These superficial, screen-bound creatures kept coming back to me, though a deeper monster, stirring at the inequalities I witnessed through lockdown, my disillusionment

at seeing people fight over soap and toilet rolls on emptying shelves, still lay beneath, waiting for my research to address it.

Mark Fisher adopted hauntology (after Derrida) to describe the post-modernism of contemporary culture and its inability to escape the forms and models of previous eras: 'we live in a time when the past is present and the present is saturated with the past' (Fisher, 2013, p. 49). Initially, this notion struck a chord with my cinematic interests and the remembered sci-fi and horror films of my childhood. Movie monsters like Michael Myers, the Cybermen and Godzilla had persistently haunted my maturing art practice – the argument that these characters had become revenants of popular culture, destined to be continually resurrected or re-imagined through perpetual film releases, helped me understand my fascination with them. Additionally, the theory's interrogation of temporal and spatial dislocation appeared immediately useful to describe the peripheral zones I explored, and mirrored the instability and displacement I was feeling in the midst of a national lockdown. While Fisher's appropriation of hauntology helped me to contextualise my revival of dated *Doctor Who* villains, it was Ballard who instigated a wider paradigm shift in psycho-geographic concerns: as his writing began to explore the effect of suburban and hinterland areas on his fictional characters, the discipline slowly refocussed from the urban centres of London and Paris to the peripheries and Iain Sinclair's monumental trek around the M25.

Within my work the areas of hauntology and psycho-geography are deeply entwined, as the disorientating effect of the Thames path and Dartford Crossing heavily contributes to the temporal instability of my experience. Iain Sinclair (2004) echoes this dislocation in his own reflections on the A282: 'In clouds. Above water. Between Essex and Kent. The one section of London's orbital motorway that is not acknowledged as the M25, different rules, different space-time continuum' (p. 392). As Sinclair (2002) notes elsewhere, 'to drift through low cloud, through the harp strings of the suspension bridge, is to become a quotation; to see yourself from outside' (p. 46). Ballard's thoughts on the landscape of the road affirmed this temporal displacement: 'what you find out on the M25 and any sort of motorway zone is that there is no past, no future' (Ballard in Petit, 2002: 56:25). Smithson's (1967) tour of Passaic, New Jersey, revealed similar disjunctions between past and present as he noted derelict diggers on a construction site: 'extinct machines – mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin. On the edge of this prehistoric Machine Age were pre- and post-World War II suburban houses' (p. 54). These artist and writers' fascination with peripheral zones and science fiction culture

connects to my merging of silver-suited robots from a passed future, with the Brutalist architecture of the QE II Bridge and the desolate edge-lands of Essex. Smithson's practice seemed to pre-empt my concerns, fashioning the places that we both connected with, into a temporal void: 'sepulchral monuments, alien deserts, science fiction landscapes – served Smithson as he sought to picture the evacuation of time' (Barikin, McAuliffe, and Melville, 2018, p. 18).

The Dartford Crossing seemed a perfect location to facilitate my resurrection of BBC time travel narratives – as I started to read more widely around the subject, Stephen Prince (2019) informed me that hauntology is quintessentially British. By spray-painting onto the raw concrete stanchions, I was creating and adding to layers and surfaces that bridged between places (Essex and Kent) and timelines (past, present and forgotten futures) on this site. Criminologist Theo Kindynis (2019) explores the connection between hauntology and graffiti in a recent text, noting the physical, sedimentary layering of painted tags on frequently sprayed surfaces; as parts of layers are rubbed, peeled or cleaned away, remnants of past images and writing beneath return to re-exist with the present; as Mark Fisher (2012) notes, 'place is stained by time' (p. 19). When I returned to review my Cybermen a few weeks later, they had been covered by a larger, more colourful and ambitious work of graffiti. My pair of *Doctor Who* villains were buried again – invisible, but present – much like a ghost that haunts a place, always with the potential to return. While I had partially contextualised and positioned this piece and my practice, there were still spaces to explore, times to travel – I had created a future that didn't happen – a sequel to *The Invasion* of 1967 – a lost future? In my practice, the real monster hadn't awakened – the invasion hadn't happened yet – but it soon would…

The rise of the Cybermen

Upon reviewing the images of my spray-painted cybermen, I was left wanting a greater scale to the work – the stretching concrete surfaces of the QE II Bridge held much potential, like huge blank canvases. In the autumn before lockdown, I had visited two exhibitions: Mark Leckey's *O' magic power of bleakness* (September 2019 – January 2021, Tate Britain), where the artist illuminated a replica motorway bridge with reconstructed figures and events from his past, and Mark Bradford's *Cerberus* (October – December 2019, Hauser & Wirth), featuring a video documenting the projection of *Dancing in the streets* (Martha and the Vandellas, 1964)

onto the back alleys of South Los Angeles from a moving van. Witnessing Leckey's 1990's track-suited teenage memories haunting the Tate galleries and viewing Bradford's experiment ripple across fencing and warehouses – ghosts of the past and social change haunting an industrial American landscape – I came to see projection as a way to develop the spectral traces and temporal layering of hauntology emerging in my practice: 'it's like recalling the spirit of that place, and at the same time inserting another history on top of it' (Bradford in Somers, 2019). With a battery-powered projector and enlisting the help of a professional photographer, Scott, I returned to the QE II Bridge on the evening of 27th December 2020, determined to see the ghosts of the Cybermen rise again.

Figure 12: Ralph Overill (2020) *Ghosts of the Cybermen*. Photographs: Scott Freeland

As our shivering fingers fumbled with the equipment, a spectral cyber-behemoth illuminated the tide-flecked pillar, rising 20 feet high from the primordial Thames silt. I had exhumed a monster, not only from the river, but from deep inside me, harbouring my reflections on a sick, quarantined world. With his mirrors placed in the Yucatan rainforests and his islands made from broken glass, projection seemed as much a part of Robert Smithson's practice as my own, and as I regarded my creation, fragments of his writing entered my mind: 'Space Age and Stone Age attitudes overlap to form the Zero-Zone, wherein the spaceman meets the brontosaurus in

a Jurassic swamp on Mars' (Smithson, 1963, p.3). I had found Ground Zero – a collision between road and river, past and future, monster and maker.
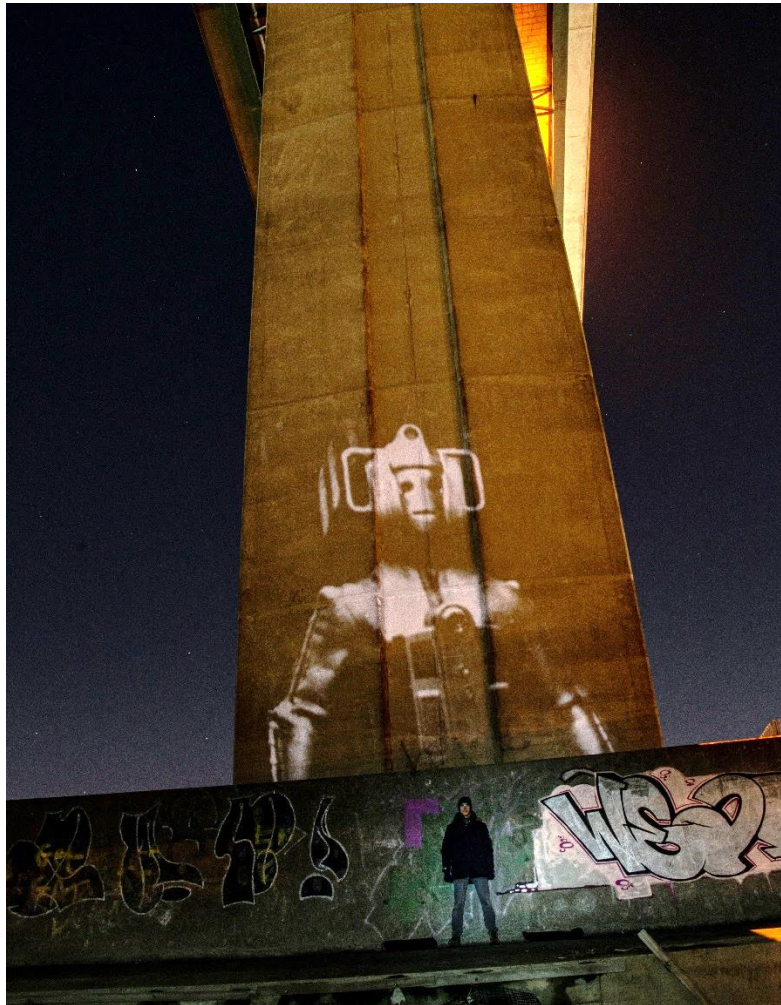

Figure 13: Ralph Overill (2020) *Ralph with Cyberman*. Photograph: Scott Freeland

The Brutalist bridge supports seemed a perfect backdrop to my projection, and further research found that Stephen Prince (2019) argues how Brutalism evokes 'lost progressive futures and alternative pathways society may have taken rather than its real-world failures' (p. 139). Compelled to read deeper into Mark Fisher's work, I understood that his hauntology aspired to re-discover these lost futures as a way to escape the all-consuming, ultimately unsatisfying and imprisoning late-capitalist way of life. His book *Capitalist Realism*, 2009, notes that late-Capitalist values have become so deeply embedded in our mindsets and lifestyles, that they have become the only imaginable way to govern society: 'it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Fisher, 2009, p. 1). The Cyberman – predominantly light-skinned and male, focussed on hostile takeovers and efficiency – became a monster that reflected everything I felt was wrong with contemporary society: the emotionless, immovable

mouth, dead eyes shedding a pre-implanted tear for the poor, shiny and smooth in appearance (new gloss over old, tired ideas) upgradable, replicable, disposable – the Cyberman is every politician, manager, CEO; reading empty promises from the script to placate the crowd, keep the power. Iain Sinclair (2002) seemed to agree in his description of New Labour's Trade and Industry secretary, Stephen Byers: 'a panicked automaton, a top-of-the-range cryogenic model of the public servant' (p. 64). I finally had an avatar through which to depict my frustrations and disillusionment at the rampant business ontology and inequality in our society. My fleeting projections onto the supports of a road opened by Margaret Thatcher in 1986 represented the continual haunting of damaging, power-hungry governments, and their suppressing and burying of alternative, now lost, futures – 'the spectre of a world which could be free' (Fisher, 2018, p. 753). The Cyberman had become a vessel which projected my frustrations and anxieties of contemporary society – pandemic included – onto the structures and surfaces that strain under its continually growing pressures: repeated episodes and cycles of under-funded health, transport and education systems, under the umbrella of an ever-growing abyss between the most privileged and most vulnerable in society. Hauntology, for me, became like Sinclair's London orbital road – cultural debris and remnants of our concerns spiralling and colliding around a clapped-out core – there will always be another pandemic, new variant, the next climate crisis, housing shortage; just wait for it to come around again. Like the abandoned asylums that mark the perimeter of the M25, the margins bring us not only to the edge of landscape, but of psyche and memory – the brink of sanity – where monsters are made. Hauntology is the promise of monsters; both individually, and as a society, we are forever destined to be haunted by the recycled ghosts of our anxieties, insecurities and failings, 'the spectre is the future – it is always to come' (Derrida, 1994, p. 39).

Reflection on this work returned me to psycho-geography and the importance of walking – there is no road access to the foundations of the Dartford Crossing, Scott and I had walked for miles along the Thames river path, with only torches and the residual light from surrounding factories for guidance. Guy Debord had employed psycho-geographic tactics to protest against the rising consumerism and commodification in 1950s Paris: 'walking is seen as contrary to the spirit of the modern city with its promotion of swift circulation and the street-level gaze that walking requires allows one to challenge the official representation of the city by cutting across established routes and exploring those marginal and forgotten areas' (Coverley, 2006, p. 12). From protest marches to investigative wanderings, walking could be viewed as political act: 'a bodily demonstration of political or cultural conviction and one of the most universally

available forms of public expression' (Solnit, 2001, p. 217). Sinclair's written records of his roaming through his home city (see *The Last London*, 2017) would often criticise the capital's ineffectual governance, scathing both Thatcherite, New Labour and preceding systems. Though I found it easy to agree with these complaints, my practice was at odds with this focus and politicising of the city – I was a psycho-geographer of Ballard's edge-lands – and while Debord's aspirations for the Situationist International had largely petered out, my Smithson-inspired practice of spray-painting and projecting was doing more than just experiencing and recording the landscape. These peripheries and their Brutalist surfaces offered blank canvases of raw concrete – space to project ideas onto (space that would be populated, monitored and policed in the city); by embellishing the margins of Thurrock with Cybermen, I was both depicting and bringing attention to the crippling matrix of capitalist realism, while also demonstrating that things don't have to stay the same – in the margins, lost futures can still be found, there are still potentials and possibilities: space can be changed. 'The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again' (Fisher, 2009, p. 81).

Figure 14: Ralph Overill (2021) *Cyber bridge*, photograph.

Conclusions

Changing space

The pandemic became a catalyst for change in my research, compelling me out of the studio and into the peripheries, where I was forced to confront and question the deeper monsters driving my practice. By conquering the QE II Bridge with a giant Cyberman, I was able to understand its Brutalist surfaces and connect both site and robot to Mark Fisher's writing.

Through the development of my research, I came to understand hauntology as the stuttering of a monstrous late-Capitalist system, and psycho-geography as a way of connecting with and reclaiming the spaces it threatens to engulf. Being present in landscapes at our peripheries enables and encourages us to think more freely, allowing memories and imaginations to emerge and be projected onto these desolate, bleak non-places. The Dartford Crossing became a bridge not only between Essex and Kent, but to the edges of my psyche and my forgotten hopes and fears – the lost futures of hauntology. Thinking of mine and Scott's stumbling walk through the raw winter darkness of the Thames path, it was only through being lost, displaced in this undefinable hinterland that the greater potentials of what I was doing revealed themselves. As Ballard reflected on his own literary investigations of the perimeter: 'That's the message of my fiction. We need to explore total alienation and find what lies beyond. The secret module that underpins who we are and our imaginative remaking of ourselves that we all embrace' (Ballard in Sinclair, 2002, p. 269). I now think of the margins as sites of potential: somewhere (or nowhere) where something can happen. I continue to walk this space because it is still space: room to remember, to dream, to change.

The last Cyberman

Exhuming the fragments of these *Doctor Who* villains, buried deep in the VHS recesses of my childhood, allowed a new breed of monster to enter my research: quintessentially hauntological in their originating from a British future-passed and their metaphorical connections to late-capitalist politics, the Cybermen have revealed and expressed my frustrations with profit-driven greed and consumerism – from my inability to integrate with the virtual learning platforms induced through the COVID-19 lockdowns, to my questioning of the business ontology adopted by educational institutions and my dismay at the growing financial inequalities in our society. They have become the avatar that allows me to foster political considerations in my work, developing my understanding of hauntology and psycho-geography, and the connections between the two. As I enter the final year of my research degree, I plan to embark on a project that pushes these themes further, imagining an unrealised future where late-capitalism and the reign of the Cybermen has collapsed, leaving only the voids of the margins, inhabited by vagrants and outsiders, defiant of capitalist culture. In a development of my relationship to the monster, I will embody the sole surviving Cyberman (complete with home-made cyber-suit) who must traverse these spaces of imagination and

alienation, in an attempt to realise a purpose for his existence. Busy constructing my armour from bottle-tops and silver spray-paint, I am unsure what this imagined future holds, though with another trip planned down the Thames river path, the Cyberman may rise from the QE II Bridge one last time.

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