

Feature Review

## WESTERN EDGES

*Evil Aliens* and Island Otherness in British Cinema

PHILIP HAYWARD

Macquarie University, Sydney <phayward@humanities.mq.edu.au>

Abstract

*Evil Aliens* (2005), directed by Jake West, offers a vivid representation of a western British island as a place of liminal otherness. It builds on a cinematic tradition of representing such locations as places of difference and transition to an (implied) Anglo-British cultural core and provides a new inflection that facilitates a particularly vivid crystallisation of themes. The following analysis identifies the significance of the island location to *Evil Aliens*' narrative and reflects on the continuing sense of western liminality present in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Anglo-British imagination of 'its' island fringe.

Keywords

British islands, British cinema, Horror, Wales

Introduction

It should be stated at the outset that *Evil Aliens* is *anything but* a contemplative film. Rather it is a comedic blend of Science Fiction and the visceral sub-genre of Horror cinema often referred to as 'Splatter'. This makes its prominent articulation of an island theme all the more notable. One of the early motivations behind the scholarly contemplation of popular culture was the recognition that it often mobilised significant representations of race, class, gender, place etc. within its narrative scenarios and visual and/or sonic representations. Analyses of these levels of popular cultural texts often involve bringing what was latent to the surface (as opposed to unravelling the patterns of authorial intentionality that were presumed to mark more serious 'high' cultural texts). In Britain the work of the British Film Institute and its various publishing outlets brought critical attention to such populist studios as Gainsborough (Aspinall and Murphy [eds], 1983) and such mainstream directors as Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (Christie, 1978) or Sydney Lauder and Frank Gilliat (Brown, 1977). One topic the BFI and its associated circle of writers neglected to attend to was the body of British films that have represented islandness, most specifically that of the nation's north western Celtic fringe. While US director Robert Flaherty's feature length dramatised documentary *Man of Aran* (1934), made for Gainsborough Studios, and Michael Powell's *Edge of the World* (1937), shot on the Shetland island of Foula, have been given the most serious attention<sup>1</sup>, a series of other commercial films produced by directors with little immediate connection with the locales and societies they represent has also provided varied considerations of islandness.

The most notable films of the latter type are Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *Spy in Black* (1939) and *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945), Alexander Mackendrick's *Whisky Galore* (1949), Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973) and Clive Rees's *When the Whales Came* (1989). In their different ways these films represent western islands as liminal edges of centralised UK hegemony, where older, different and/or alien ways contest with modernity. These films touch on deeper cultural associations of the islands of the West as cultural fringes in the Anglo-British imagination, as –

simultaneously - lingering residues of Gaelic culture and the fabled 'Isles of Paradise' and 'Isles of The Dead' of Celtic mythology. As authors such as Johnson (1994) have discussed, the Atlantic has long been populated with "phantom islands" that have only dissipated as mapping and cross-Atlantic traffic has defined the region. Alistair Moffat's critically praised *The Sea Kingdoms: The History of Celtic Britain and Ireland* (2001) refreshed this cultural figure by combining a personal travelogue, historical research and characterisations of the (present-day) British nation's maritime fringe as "Islands of the Evening" and as "Islands of the Mighty" (to quote the titles of Chapters 3 and 4).

*The Wicker Man's* pagan realm of Summerisle is the clearest example of the magical imagination of islands in Anglo-British cinema. The film concerns the mysterious disappearance of a child on a remote western Scottish island, an investigation by a mainland policeman and his discovery of the pagan cult that eventually conspires to murder him. The film's setting was inspired in substantial part by the Findhorn community (on the Moray Firth coast) founded in the mid 1960s by Peter and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy Maclean<sup>2</sup>. But – in contrast to Findhorn's quiet mysticism - Summerisle readily turns to pagan barbarities such as human sacrifice to ensure future harvests. By contrast, *When the Whales Came* is set far to the south, in the Scilly Isles, west of Cornwall. This location militates against any direct association with a Celtic past (since the Scillies were one of the first areas of Cornwall colonised by English settlers [back in the early Medieval period] and were not significantly re-invested with Cornish-Celtic identity during the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century revival of Cornish language and identity). Despite this, the film's narrative, first presented in children's fiction author Michael Morpugo's 1985 novel<sup>3</sup>, is based around a cursed island, a mysterious hermit and the mystical arrival of a pod of narwhals. The film's landscape imagery and emotive orchestration complement this by creating a vivid sense of remote islandness as key to the scenario, and of the liminal, magical possibilities of such a space. A similar supernatural aspect also forms the mystical Celtic undertow to *I Know Where I'm Going*, which is permeated by the lure of outer islands. In this context *Evil Aliens* fits smoothly into a tradition of representation despite a specific genre location that does not immediately attract attention within such a frame.

### *Evil Aliens* – Genre Context

*I describe Evil Aliens as 'splat-stick' and 'tongue through cheek' and it's my love letter to old school horror like 'Evil Dead', 'Phantasm' and Peter Jackson's 'Bad Taste' that I was lucky enough to experience as an impressionable teen... and it struck me no one was making these kind of movies anymore. (Jake West, 2005: online)*

The notion of cinematic auteurism developed in Europe in the 1950s and 1960s and attempted to 'redeem' areas of mainstream commercial cinema for serious critical analysis by isolating particular directors who showed patterns of similar pre-occupation and accomplishment across a series of films (that might be construed as an authorial 'oeuvre'). In parallel with this were critical ventures that attempted to open up other areas of popular cinema through sustained considerations of those commonalities of theme and narrative that could be deemed genres. The Western (see Kitses, 1970) was one of the first of these to be identified and mined for deeper meanings and significance. Horror cinema has also received sustained scrutiny (see, for instance Clover, 1992). While there are no auteurist monographs (to date) that address his work, British director Jake West might develop as suitable for such consideration at a later date, if the engaging body of low budget/high ingenuity music videos and Horror films he has produced over the last decade is any indication. His career highlights so far include the modern vampire feature *Razor Blade Smile* (1998), *Evil Aliens* (2005) and *Pumpkinhead III: Ashes to Ashes* (2007).

As the opening quotation of this section makes apparent, West has identified that *Evil Aliens* was envisaged as a tribute to 'classic' 1970-80s Horror cinema, particularly those films that featured extensive uses of gore and visceral shock (of the type described by Brophy, 1985). West's characterisation of his approach as "splat-stick" (punning on 'slapstick') and "tongue through cheek"

emphasises the manner in which he combines viscerality and gore with comedy to offset the film's Horror orientation.

Islands have, of course, been regular locations for Horror cinema. Notable examples include the various cinematic adaptations of H.G Wells's mad-scientist fable *The Island of Dr Moreau*<sup>4</sup>, The Haitian-themed voodoo thriller *I Walked with a Zombie* (1953), the mutant Caribbean pirate feature *The Island* (1980) or the more recent bizarre genre cocktail *Piñata: Survival Island* (2002). It is also notable that both the Japanese originals and US remakes of Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (Ring) films revolve around an evil that emanates from and returns to a remote island location. One of the appeals for directors and writers is that the very boundedness of islands reduces escape options for those beleaguered upon them. Their otherness (from mainlands) also provides an immediate context for menace and unease.



Figure 1: *Evil Aliens* UK film release promotional poster

### Locale and Narrative

*Evil Aliens* is set on a (fictional) island off the northwest coast of Wales named Scalleum. The island is shown on a map onscreen early in the film and occupies a location off the western tip of the Llyn peninsula (that lies between Caernarfan and Cardigan Bays). This is not without significance as its northern island neighbour, Anglesey (known in Welsh Gaelic as 'Ynys Mon') was a centre of Druidic culture in the pre-Christian era and also the site of a major battle between Gaels and alien invaders (in the form of Romans) in 61AD. Scalleum island – like other celebrated (actual) British islands such as Lindisfarne or St Michaels Mount – is connected to the coast at low tide (by the appropriately named 'Devil's Causeway'). West has identified this location as a deliberate rather than incidental one:

*I wanted this story to be shot in a location where you wouldn't normally expect to encounter celluloid aliens (rather than setting it in Nevada!). A remote island in the back of Wales can be as sinister as a city back alley after dark. (2005: online)*

Confirming the latter characterisation, *Evil Aliens* isn't the first horror film set on a remote Welsh island, this honour falling to Hammer Horror director Terence Fischer, who set his 1966 feature *Island of Terror* on the fictional Petrie's Island. However, unlike West's film, the island locale has little other resonance in Fischer's feature beyond its boundedness and the isolation that has allowed its errant scientists to develop mutant silicone based life-forms that menace the human inhabitants.

Aside from its causeway, Scalleum's other notable physical feature is a megalithic stone circle known as 'The Devil's Teeth', which – according to local belief - is associated with the supernatural and believed to be cursed. The narrative introduces us to this location early on. An aerial shot shows a couple in the stone circle at twilight. Whether attracted by the remote nature of the spot or by some frisson of transgression at making out at a monumental site, the couple are passionately having sex. However their post-coital repose is disturbed when they are kidnapped by aliens and taken to a spaceship where the man is killed and the woman (named 'Cat') is implanted with an alien foetus. The megalithic site thereby becomes reinvested with a dual liminality through a combination of ancient magic associations and alien visitation (similar to the pretext of 1950s' English Science Fiction/Horror series *Quatermass*). Reports of this incident filter through to London and attract the attention of a cable TV show entitled *Weirde World*, fronted by a reporter named Michelle Fox (played by real-life UK TV presenter Emily Booth). Despite initial scepticism she gets approval to shoot an item on the incident. Pausing only to recruit a 'UFOlogist' (who is shown investigating ley lines at Avebury stone circle immediately prior to departing), they drive off to Scalleum. Arriving at night in a dark rural farmhouse that immediately evokes comparison to iconic Horror locations (such as the family home of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* [1973]), they encounter Cat's brothers. The trio are marked by their facial expressions and behaviour as potentially deranged and by language as decidedly different. As Cat explains, they only speak Welsh.



Figure 2: Still from *Evil Aliens*' combat scene

Here the film condenses Anglo-British stereotypes and, arguably, a subliminal loathing of Gaelic - and specifically Welsh - cultural difference. The genre stereotype underlying this facet is the degeneration of rural white communities into feral 'white trash' that features in seminal US Horror

films, usually set in the South, such as *Deliverance* (1972) or *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977). Helpfully subtitled their dialogue, the film establishes Scalleum as a surviving bastion of Gaelic in Wales (a ‘Fro Gymraeg’ in Welsh), its isolation providing a linguistic sanctuary (much as the Aran Islands form a centre of the Irish Gaeltacht). By implication, this isolation also ‘explains’ their feral coarseness. From this point on the narrative intensifies, with marauding aliens first slaughtering cattle then characters, and the humans fighting back with equal violence. Further drama is provided as Cat (and eventually Fox) are transformed into malevolent aliens by the foetuses implanted within them.

Images such as that reproduced in Figure 2 (above) accurately represent key elements in the film – the manic leering grin of an island ‘inbreed’ and the gritty female heroine battling the alien hordes. But the film also includes a number of less violent scenes that offer distinct images of islandness and of its duality (as prison/haven). The most obvious are those involving the causeway itself, a lengthy winding track that crosses the tidal flat that separates Scalleum from the mainland (Figure 3 below). The problems this might cause are signalled early in the piece by the crew’s unease at learning that access is restricted by tide. This later comes back to haunt them as they flee from the aliens in their van only to arrive at the beach at high tide, with their route cut off. At this point, one character, the half-blind TV crew soundman, cannot take the pressure any more and swims off towards the far shore. As the film’s conclusion makes apparent, he is the only one to survive. The island becomes a graveyard for aliens and humans alike as the stones in the Devil’s Teeth ring magically rise into the sky and destroy the aliens’ spaceship.



Figure 3: Still from *Evil Aliens* - Causeway

The score for *Evil Aliens* was composed by Richard Wells and mainly features digitally generated ‘orchestral’ sequences, including loose leitmotifs (‘signature’ melodies) representing the alien and human adversaries. Appropriately for such a parodic film the score uses sustained tension-building passages and short sharp ‘stings’ for dramatic effect in combination with passages that playfully allude to previous film conventions – such as the use of sequences that recall Ennio Morricone’s music for epic Westerns (that geographical reference again...) such as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968).

One of the comic centrepieces of the film involves the increasingly desperate TV crew deploying a combine harvester to massacre a group of aliens pursuing them, running them down and mashing them in its blades. Striking as the images of (alien) blood splattering the cornfields are, the comic effect is generated through the juxtaposition of the visual and narrative element with the soundtrack. Climbing into the harvester cabin to start the engine, the driver puts on a cassette tape left in the vehicle, which first plays at low volume (realistically, within the scene) and then rises in prominence to fill the soundtrack as the action commences. The track is an incongruously jaunty pop song with a refrain of “Well I’ve got a brand new combine harvester’ sung in an exaggerated Somerset accent. On its most apparent textual level this operates both to distance the viewer from any disturbing observation of the slaughter and to underline the resurgent rurality embodied in the Welsh-speaking farmers. Those familiar with the track can also grasp a further level of comic effect through recognising the performers as long established South Western English (‘Scrumpy and Western’<sup>5</sup>) comedy/pop act The Wurzels; and the song as the 1976 number 1 UK single hit *The Combine Harvester* (itself a parody of Melanie Safka’s 1971 UK hit single *Brand New Key*). The band achieved its highest popularity in the 1970s but has continued to perform through to the present. The exaggerated and unrepentantly rural music used in this scene emphasises the local regional difference and identity that provides a resource for the city-based crew to exploit in combating their extraterrestrial adversaries. In this regard, the self-parody of the Wurzels’ own regional identity provides a softer stereotype than the representation of the Welsh community core to the narrative.

### Conclusion - 21<sup>st</sup> Century Perceptions

Like many other western countries, Britain has experienced a general depopulation of remote areas, such as its outer islands, over the last 80-100 years, as individuals and families relocate to larger islands and/or the mainland to seek greater work, education, health and/or entertainment opportunities. There are exceptions to this. Islands with special economic status, such as the Isle of Man or Jersey, actively attract migrants but the north-western fringes of the nation continue to experience population declines. In this sense, they have lost significance to Britain’s central economy and social makeup. But this very emptying, and their nature as fringes of an increasingly overcrowded metropolitan country, reinforce islands’ status as places of imagined otherness and curiosity, staple to the grist of tourism and imagination. Christopher Somerville’s 1991 travelogue through Britain’s outer islands marks a recent revival of interest that has been maintained through to the present. This manifests itself in various forms. There are, for instance, strong parallels between *Evil Aliens* and Bella Bathurst’s 2005 account of lawless wrecking communities on Britain’s maritime fringe (including the Scilly Islands, the isles of the Pentland Firth, the Western Scottish Isles and the ephemeral Goodwin sand islands of the North Sea). At a different extreme, major publications such as *The Guardian* daily newspaper have also recently begun to run regular features on weird and wacky aspects of island life, such as ley line hunters on Lundy island (in the Bristol channel) (Bowes, 2007) and disagreements among Aran islanders as to whether Inis Mór or Inis Óirr was the inspiration behind the ‘Craggy Island’ location featured in the popular British TV comedy *Father Ted* (Lanyado, 2007). While softer than the former characterisations, this trivialisation of islands, as quaint, quirky – even comedic – places is arguably as invidious, obscuring resource inequalities, community resilience and their cultural value.

*Evil Aliens’* representations clearly accord with aspects of this contemporary revival of interest in and envisioning of British island marginality. Its gleeful collision of mythic monuments, no-holds barred conflict between aliens and humans and (eventual) harmony, reconciliation and teamwork between islanders and metropolitans provides a closure to a feature that explores regional difference only to produce a united microcosm of the kingdom of Britain that reinscribes the margins into a national identity. But the polarisation that is reconciled by the film’s ending does nothing to dampen the vivid representation of extreme regional degeneration key to the narrative on Scalleum. In this regard there is a degree of ambiguity about the film’s title. Who precisely are the ‘evil aliens’ referred to? Its genre location ensures that its latent ‘messages’ are confined to those who seek to uncover them but their existence (at least as asserted in this article) serves to confirm that Anglo-British popular culture, and popular cinema in particular, continues to explore and process aspects of the nation’s

innate islandness despite (or, perhaps better, *in the face of*) the country's increasing absorption into the European community and an internationalised media space and the partial devolution of power to its Gaelic nations that threatens the uneasy union it strives to retain.

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### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> See George Stoney and James Brown's documentary analysis *How the Myth Was Made: A Study of Robert Flaherty's Man of Aran* (1978). Powell's interest in the island of Foula resulted in his 1938 book on the film's production, entitled '200,000 feet on Foula' (1938) and he later revisited the location and directed a short documentary entitled *Return to the Edge of the World* (1978) (which is included on the 2003 DVD release of the original feature).

<sup>2</sup> That mixes Christianity with a belief in 'devas' (plant spirits).

<sup>3</sup> Entitled 'Why the Whales Came' (my emphasis).

<sup>4</sup> Including *Island of Lost Souls* (1932), *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1977) and *L'Isola degli Uomini Pesce* (1979).

<sup>5</sup> A term they coined to describe their individual genre, 'localising' Country and Western music – 'Scrumpy' being a local form of cider and 'Western' referring to their West Country orientation.

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