

28 Days Later

Directed by Danny Boyle

Words: Steve Anderson

Cinematic fantasies of the ultimate human Apocalypse, it seems, no longer require nuclear holocaust, alien invasion or hurtling asteroids. In Danny Boyle's terrifying thriller *28 Days Later*, the end of the world as we know it is just one ill-conceived lab experiment and four weeks of rapid infection away.

Wrongly pegged as an updated contribution to the zombie-horror genre of the 1970s, *28 Days Later* in fact owes more to Hitchcock than to George Romero. Boyle, who directed cult favorites *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1996) seemed to have succumbed to the world of big-budget Hollywood with his critically reviled *The Beach* in 2000. With *28 Days Later*, however, Boyle reasserts himself as one of the UK's most compelling directors and a master of edgy suspense. Indeed, if the first 10 minutes of *28 Days Later* did not succeed in riveting audiences to the screen, the premise they establish would surely seem laughable.

28 Days Later opens with group of animal rights activists infiltrating a laboratory where chimpanzees are being forced to watch an endless stream of hyper violent media images. The chimps, it turns out, are part of an experiment with "rage" that has somehow distilled the defining emotion of our culture into virus form. When the activists attempt to coax the poor animals out of their cages, the angry monkeys quickly run amok, attacking their would-be rescuers with all the fury of a cuckolded spouse on the *Jerry Springer* show. In just seconds, each victim is transformed into a teeth-gnashing, blood-spitting embodiment of pure anger. Unlike typical zombie flesh-eaters, these "infecteds" attack with superhuman speed, setting off a chain reaction that quickly reduces the city to a lifeless wasteland.

Or nearly lifeless. Flashing forward 28 days, we discover a survivor named Jim, played with edgy desperation by the gaunt, disheveled Cillian Murphy. Jim is a bike messenger who has awakened from a coma just weeks after the rage virus was loosed upon the city. He wanders uncomprehendingly through the deserted streets of London until being taken in by another survivor, the no-nonsense Selena (Naomie Harris), who teaches Jim, quite simply, that the only way to survive in this new world is to kill or be killed. The uneasy duo follow a flashing light to a high-rise besieged by infecteds, and form an alliance

with the fatherly Frank (Brendan Gleeson) and his teenaged daughter (Megan Burns).

Fortunately, this foursome is no rag-tag team of misfits whose combined talents destine them to triumph over infection. The bear-like Frank is a working class London cab driver determined to protect his young daughter and their new friends but he has no idea what to do once their meager supplies of food and water run out. Selena is the only hardened survivor in the group, free of emotional attachments and prepared to kill without hesitation. Jim is the opposite, a sensitive optimist who insists on making the impossibly dangerous and heartbreaking trip to the suburbs on foot to find out whether his parents are still alive.

The group eventually follows a radio beacon north to an Army barricade near Manchester where the icy Major Henry West (Christopher Eccleston) offers them a hot shower and their first step back toward civilization. Major West appears to be a man of culture who has been toughened by his profession to see the tragedy of human existence in its continuing desire to kill. Following the logic of the horror genre, this seeming bastion of civilization quickly turns out to be anything but, and the struggle to escape from infection becomes the struggle to escape from sanctuary.

Boyle's subtle command of dramatic texture and solid character development allows his characters to transcend mere horror movie "types" and gives the film its power and resonance beyond the screen. Indeed, the world created by Boyle and screenwriter Alex Garland (*The Beach*) is so dark and horrific as to make survival seem not only an unlikely, but quite possibly undesirable, outcome.

28 Days Later was shot by the virtuosic Anthony Dod Mantle, who has almost single-handedly elevated digital cinematography to an art form in the past decade. He previously worked with Boyle on the features *Strumpet* (2001) and *Vacuuming Completely Nude in Paradise* (2001) and the film bears the marks of Dod Mantle's utterly controlled palette. In *28 Days*' most striking visual sequences, the deserted streets of London appear streaked with gunmetal grays and sooty blacks that are somehow luminescent in the city's eerie pre-dawn light. The digital cinematography simultaneously invokes the stark visual rhetoric of urban surveillance and enables the frenetic fast-motion effect that adds to the fury when the infecteds attack.

The spectre of disease haunts our collective memory at the deepest and most troubling levels. One need not look as far back as the Smallpox and Bubonic plagues of the Middle Ages to find evidence of the destructive power of viruses. The Spanish flu of 1918 killed more people worldwide – between 20 and 40 million – than all the wars of the 19th and 20th centuries *combined*. Even today, disease – from AIDS to malaria – is responsible for more death and suffering than could be dreamed of by any *Strangelove*-inspired military strategist.

28 Days Later manages to be at once post-apocalyptic and utterly contemporary, evoking the desolate paranoia of the Cold War era at the same time that it calls on contemporary anxieties about the HIV, Mad Cow, Ebola and SARS viruses. Along the way, we are reminded of more generalized fears that the world may indeed be headed for disaster thanks to al Qaeda, genetic engineering, vivisection and biological warfare – all threats that emerge from a confluence of ignorance and arrogance in our culture's seemingly eternal struggle against the dangers of our own humanity. Each time we have the opportunity to remake our civilization, it seems, we are drawn inexorably toward *The Lord of the Flies*. *28 Days Later* offers no easy answers (though the love of a good woman never seems to hurt) even as it refuses to shy away from the hardest questions.

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