

RAGE HARD

THE MAKING OF *28 DAYS LATER*

AFTER A RUN OF CRITICAL DUDS, DANNY BOYLE'S FIFTH MOVIE WOULD RE-ESTABLISH HIM AS ONE OF BRITAIN'S MOST EXHILARATING FILMMAKERS. BUT MAKING THE FILM THAT WOULD MARK HIS COMEBACK WASN'T THE EASIEST OF RIDES, AS STEVE O'BRIEN EXPLAINS...





ade on a budget of just £6 million and yet raking in over £64m, it's fair to say that, for a modest indie, *28 Days Later* did gangbusting business. Released in November 2002, Danny Boyle's crazed action-horror caught the mood of the time. With the world reeling still from the shock of September 11th just a year before, its scenes of a desolate, hushed London were given a meaning that writer Alex Garland could never have foreseen when he presented his script to producer Andrew Macdonald in 2000.

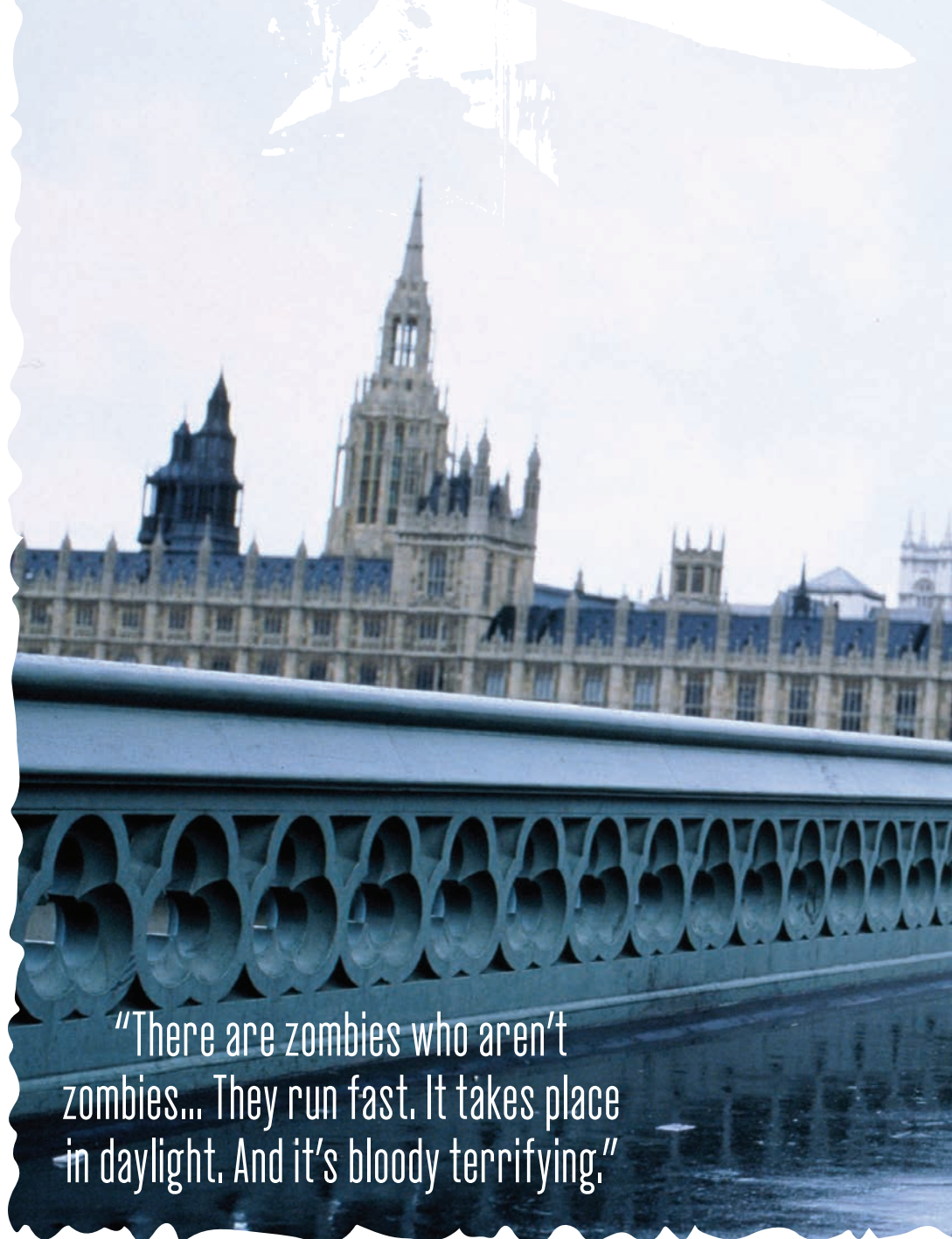
"I think the reason [the film] had the impact that it did," director Danny Boyle told *Inverse* in 2023, "is that it was the first one out of the block that touched, not directly but aesthetically and morally, some of the residue of what 9/11 had done to us."

But for all the resonance *28 Days Later* would have in a post-9/11 world, its inspiration actually came from a simple video game. A fan of zombies since his youth, it was the experience of playing *Resident Evil* that spurred Alex Garland into asking himself how much greater the zombie threat in the game would be if, instead of lumbering like the shiftless creatures from George A Romero films, they had speed on their side?

Garland had never written a screenplay before, but having connected with Macdonald and Boyle on the big screen adaptation of his 1996 novel *The Beach*, they were the first names he turned to.

"I've got this idea," he enthused to Macdonald. "It's post-apocalyptic. There are zombies who aren't zombies – they're infected. They run fast. It takes place in daylight. And it's bloody terrifying."

Macdonald was in.



"There are zombies who aren't zombies... They run fast. It takes place in daylight. And it's bloody terrifying."

Looking at it now, *28 Days Later* seems a guaranteed box office bullseye, except in 2001, zombie movies were hardly in vogue, and certainly never made the big bucks. The studios that Macdonald offered the film to all turned it down, not helped by the fact that Boyle had lost – with *A Life Less Ordinary* and *The Beach* – some of the critical cred he'd earned on *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting*.

With funding coming eventually from the National Lottery, *28 Days Later* started filming on 1 September 2001 on a budget of just £6 million (in contrast, Zach Snyder's remake of Romero's *Dawn Of The Dead* from 2004 was made for \$26 million and that was considered cheap). For Boyle, after his experiences in Hollywood this would be a return to his punky, small-budget roots – hell, even the film's best-known



Danny Boyle checking out a devastated London during filming.



Cillian Murphy in one of the film's iconic early shots of the deserted city.

actor, Christopher Eccleston, took a sizeable pay cut for the role of Major West, while the rest of the cast was made up of newer – and thus cheaper – faces, many of which had never appeared on the big screen before.

“Normally making a sci-film [requires] a huge budget,” Boyle reflected to *Filmmaker* magazine, “but we wanted to keep the budget down, and we did that because we didn’t want any stars in it. We wanted it to be just ordinary people. Not having the money can be a problem or it can be a kind of freedom, and for us it was a freedom.”

Its lack of a blockbuster price tag, then, became its virtue. Though it has a few budget-straining “money shots” in its scenes of an abandoned, devastated London, *28 Days Later* would be less about big, eyeball-wowing visuals and more about the human story at its centre.

COLD OPEN

Those scenes at the beginning of the movie, as Cillian Murphy’s character Jim wanders around an eerily-silent capital, having awoken from a coma, gave the film an immediate visual identity, particularly the overturned London bus that became one of the movie’s most iconic images.

“We had got Westminster Council to agree for us to lay a bus on its side and smash the windows,” line producer Robert How told *Inverse*. “We wanted to put it outside Downing Street and they said, ‘No, you’ve got to put it further up the road.’ We got there at four in the morning and there wasn’t anybody from the council there so we put it outside Downing Street anyway.”

BY GEORGE!

The film owes a hefty debt to the filmmaker behind the Night Of The Living Dead series...

Alex Garland has never been shy of acknowledging the influence of George A Romero’s zombie classics in the writing of *28 Days Later*. But there are, if you look hard enough, also some specific homages there.

The first tribute is in the scene where Jim, Selena, Frank and Hannah stop at a Budgens. The characters being surrounded by food and goods deliberately echoes the overt consumerism of *Dawn Of The Dead*, as Garland admitted on the DVD commentary: “The whole scene is a respectful nod towards *Dawn Of The Dead*, which is set in a shopping mall and which is one of the great bits of post-apocalyptic wish-fulfillment.”

The other scene that directly references Romero is where we see Mailer, the infected soldier that Major West has chained up at the mansion, echoing Bub, the zombie that has been captured by the humans in *Day Of The Dead*.

“It was always a character and an idea that seemed very strong,” Garland said. “I never know with that kind of thing if it’s theft or not, but it’s there anyway.”



Continuing Romero's satire of consumerism.

There were also headaches at Centre Point, on Tottenham Court Road. The streets had been closed for the filming of the scene where Jim sets the car alarm off, only for pissed off commuters to start shouting insults at the crew. “[They were] howling the most obscene words,” cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle remembered. “We were told off like little schoolboys by the authorities in Whitehall.”

DIGITAL GRAIN

One creative decision Boyle made that made those early morning shoots easier was to lens *28 Days Later* digitally. These days, most cinematic releases are made on digital cameras, but it was a rarity in 2001. Boyle fell in love with, not just the flexibility that using multiple cameras – specifically the Canon XL1 – gave him, but the jittery effect it gave when showing an attack from the infected.

“We used this frame ratio thing,” Boyle explained. “When you use these cameras, it has this frame setting which suggests it shoots not just at 24 frames per second, but it’ll also shoot at 48 and 300 and 1,000, 16,000 frames per second. When you run it, the images appear slightly jerky and we used the technique whenever anyone was infected.”

With production having kicked off on 1 September 2001, the crew were in their second week of filming when news hit of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington DC. Boyle has said that, had they tried to film those London scenes after that date it’s unlikely Westminster Council would have allowed them permission.



“We were told off like little schoolboys by the authorities in Whitehall”



Young actor Megan Burns played the daughter of Brendan Gleeson's cabbie.

“We wouldn’t have been able to film it post-9/11 because we had a freedom in London that was just ridiculous when you look back on it now,” Boyle told *Inverse* in 2023. “We were able to tow in and turn over buses outside Downing Street. Now, they’d be around you with machine guns.”

Filming took nine weeks, with locations including Waverley Abbey in Surrey (where Jim, Selena, Hannah and Frank stop off en route to Manchester) and finally Trafalgar Park near Salisbury. With the film recorded chronologically, it was in the filming of the movie’s third act that the already threadbare budget wore away to nothing. Things got so bad that Macdonald had to tell everyone there was no more money left and that the planned ending was to be scrapped. “We packed up and left,” he told *Inverse*. “We didn’t



Naomie Harris is grateful to be rescued from the manor's soldiers.

FAST FACT
THE DEAD BODIES IN THE CHURCH WERE PLAYED BY COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO VOLUNTEERED TO APPEAR IN THE FILM.



Christopher Eccleston playing against type as the upper class Major West.

finish the film. It was a very, very difficult shoot by the end. It had started in early-morning glorious sunshine and ended in the darkest English countryside in the rain."

Had the production not been granted the extra money Sony allowed them, it would have ended with Jim, Selena and Hannah breaking out of the mansion. With the new cash, an ending was shot with Jim dying of his wounds in a hospital and Selena and Hannah walking off together. Except the scene went down badly with test audiences. "Not just badly," Garland explained, "but *really* badly."

An extra scene – or to be precise, two versions of the same extra scene – were then lensed in the Lake District. The ending of the released movie, of course, features Jim, Selena and Hannah, 28 days on from

the events at the mansion, living in a remote cottage, and laying out a message – "Hello" – for a passing jet. But a version was filmed that features just Selena and Hannah, a scene that would have followed Jim's death in the abandoned hospital.

"We all felt when we watched the film with an audience with our bleak ending," Boyle explained on the DVD commentary, "that it was such a gruelling experience that it felt like you had a responsibility, especially on a journey film, to at least end with a note that the journey might continue in some way."

Those final moments of the released version are the only scenes shot on 35mm celluloid. The different process was chosen, Boyle revealed, to "feel like the film had opened up" and to give it a "different textual quality."

Even with the more optimistic ending, with all three characters still alive, test screenings were a disaster. "They just walked out," he recalled of the audience's reaction. "They kept going to the toilet. They kept talking. I remember thinking, 'Fucking hell, it doesn't work.'"

CRITICAL MASS

Even some critics seemed unfussed. Wrote Christopher Tookey in the *Daily Mail*: "Should someone with four films under his belt really be regressing to the point where he is making a cheap horror flick that resembles nothing so much as a British '50s B-movie?" The *Evening Standard* was equally scathing, with Alexander Walker writing that "there is not an earthly glimmer of an original idea in the whole film."

THE "VAN GOGH SHOT"

Danny Boyle on one of the film's most talked about images...

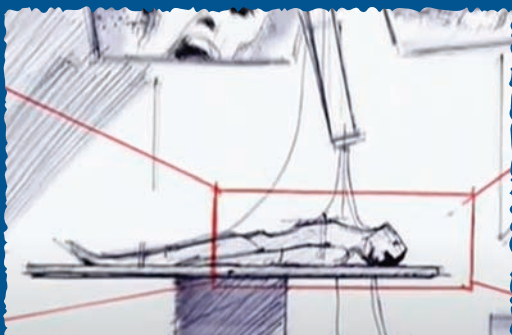
There's one shot in *28 Days Later* that stands out for its sheer beauty and, well, utter conspicuousness. That image of a field of flowers, which comes 49 minutes in, was actually one of the very first things shot for the movie, but in post-production, the decision was made to digitally alter the picture, so that it looked, in Danny Boyle's words, "like a bit of a Van Gogh".

"It's one of those mad moments," he explains – or tries to explain – on the DVD commentary about the reasons why the shot appears as it does. "People say, you should cut that, it's ridiculous, what does it mean? And then other people say, aw, I love that. You can't really explain it, and I love things like that. Sometimes you should go with things that aren't necessarily rational or explicable. The film lives in its own world, which is a very healthy place for it to be."



THE "RADICAL ALTERNATIVE ENDING"

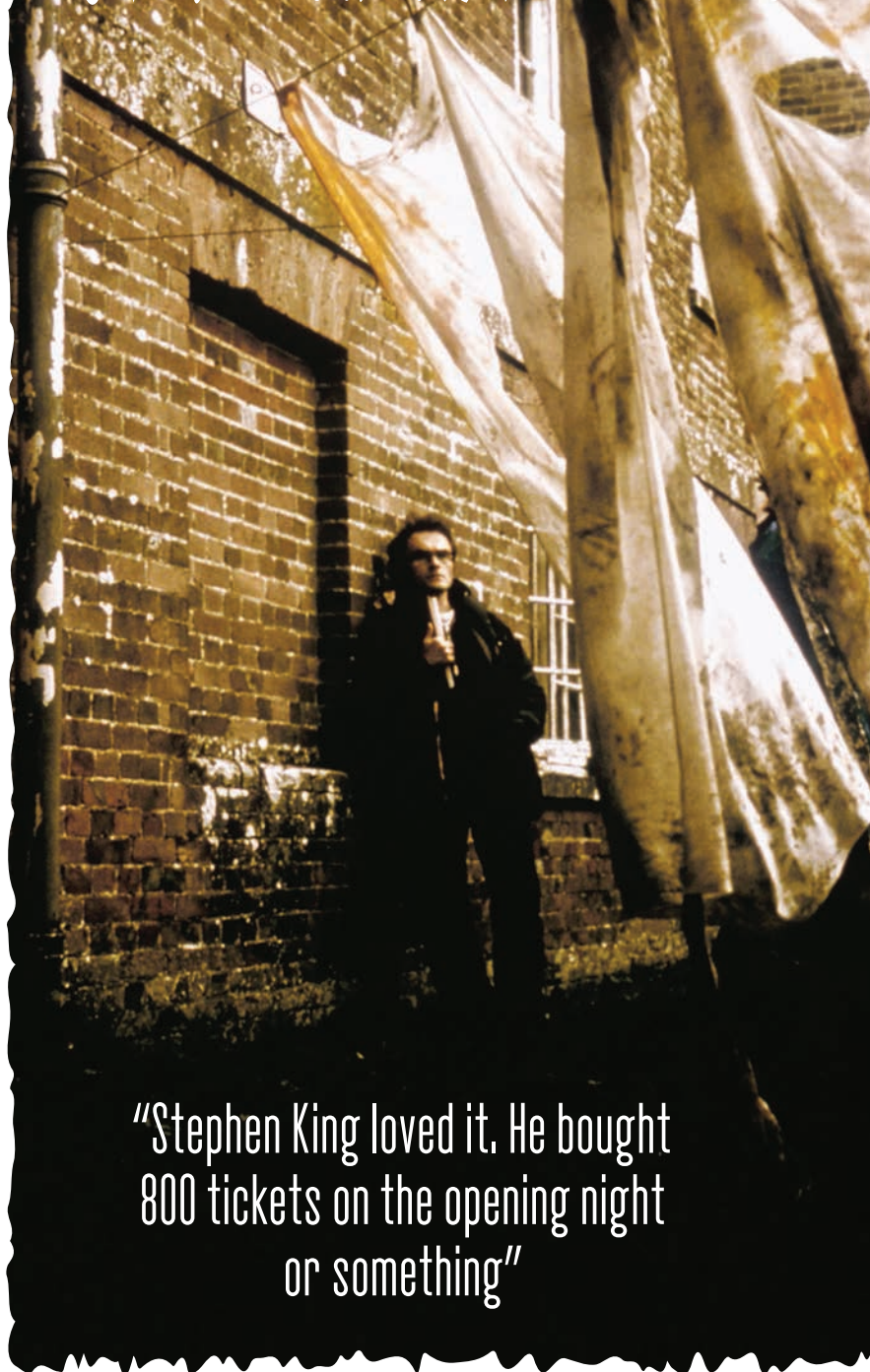
In one of the rejected endings, Jim would have sacrificed himself to save Frank...



There's the ending that's in the final cut of *28 Days Later*, and the filmed, but ultimately rejected alternative finish, which has Jim dying after being shot at the mansion and Selena and Hannah setting up house together in the Lake District. But there was another, much more extreme climax to the film that was scripted and storyboarded, and would have completely retooled the final third of the movie.

Known as the "radical alternative ending", it dispensed with the soldiers plotline, with the pivot point being the moment Frank is infected. In this version, Jim knocks out the infected Frank and the gang take him to a laboratory. There, Jim, Selena and Hannah meet a scientist who reveals to them that a full blood transfusion will cure the Rage virus. Jim sacrifices himself to save Frank, and after having his blood transferred, is left to die as the Rage consumes him.

As Boyle explained: "That was the problem right there, with this ending. We'd established that one drop in the eye will infect someone. Then how the flying fuck are we gonna sell the idea that this blood transfusion idea is gonna work. What do you do, clean out every capillary and vein with bleach, before making the transfusion?"



"Stephen King loved it. He bought 800 tickets on the opening night or something"

But not everyone was so down on *28 Days Later*. Boyle remembers bumping into Mark Kermode after one screening, with the then-Radio 1 critic exclaiming, "I've just seen your film – fucking great!"

It seemed as if Kermode spoke for more people than Walker or Tookey. Released on 21 November 2002, word of mouth on *28 Days Later* was as fast as Garland's newly fleet-footed zombies. Even America took to the movie, where it grossed \$45 million. There were famous fans too – according to Macdonald, "Stephen King loved it. He bought 800 tickets on the opening night or something."

Before *28 Days Later*, the zombie genre was as dead as the creatures from a Romero movie. But in its wake came an cavalcade of fresh zombie pictures, from *Shaun Of The Dead* (2004) to *Zombieland* (2009) to *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022) to *World*

War Z. (Though it's important to note that Boyle and Garland never use the "Z" word.) And to illustrate just how far critical opinion had come since Walker's and Tookey's take-downs, in 2017, a poll of 150 actors, directors, writers, producers and critics for *Time Out* ranked *28 Days Later* the 97th-best British film ever.

In many ways, *28 Days Later* is Boyle's *Psycho*. Hitchcock's low-budget, back-to-basics film from 1960 was a conscious step away from the gloss and finesse of his previous work and reinvented him as a director. *28 Days Later* did the same for Boyle, rescuing him from the thinking that his voice had become compromised in Hollywood. It was, in essence, a coming home for the director, a grungy, lo-fi genre feature that tested his creativity to the max.

28 Years Later has a lot to live up to... ■

THE SHADOW OF 9/11

Not only did 28 Days Later echo some of the images of 11 September, the attacks took place while the movie was being made...

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 took place just over a week into the filming of *28 Days Later*, specifically the scenes in Frank and Hannah's flat. "We had just finished a night shoot and I woke up to the news," Megan Burns, who played Hannah, recalled. "Because we were staying in Canary Wharf at the time, there was obviously panic, with Canary Wharf being the business district."

Line producer Robert How also remembered how the crew arrived at the production office to watch the news footage being broadcast from New York City. "It was a very surreal experience," he said.

The scene is one of the few in the movie that could almost be called comforting, as Jim and Selena arrive at the flat, with *Frosty The Snowman* playing in the background and Frank offering his guests drinks.

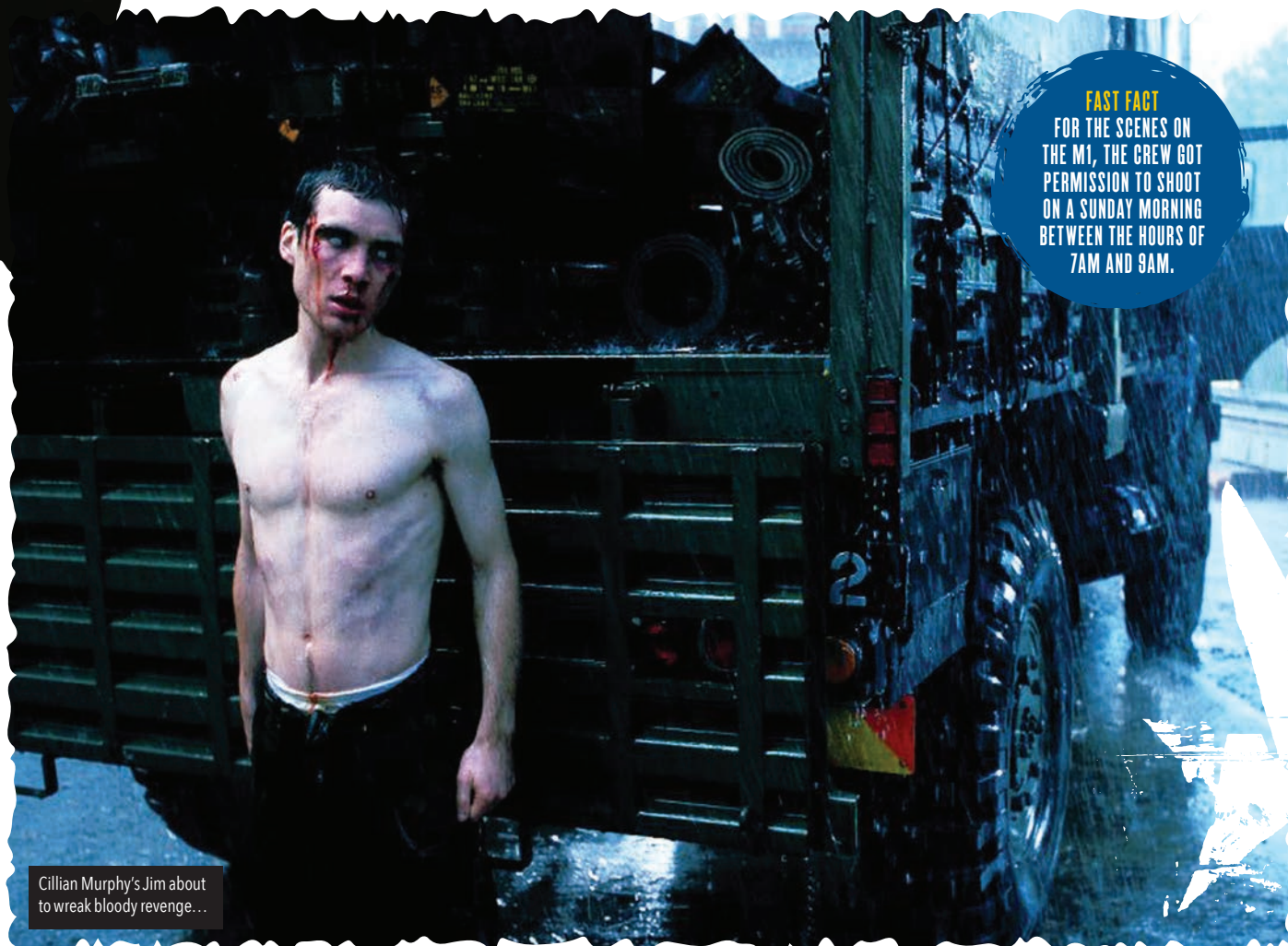
"It was very bizarre doing a scene," Boyle remembered, "with green crème de menthe and salutations on the day when the world was turning around."

A lack of council oversight meant they were able to film the bus right outside Downing Street.



FAST FACT

FOR THE SCENES ON THE M1, THE CREW GOT PERMISSION TO SHOOT ON A SUNDAY MORNING BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 7AM AND 9AM.



Cillian Murphy's Jim about to wreak bloody revenge...