The true identity of London is in its absence. As a city, it no longer exists. In this alone it is truly modern. London was the first metropolis to disappear.


A particularly favourable condition for awakening uncanny feelings is created when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one.

—Sigmund Freud (“The ‘Uncanny,’” 1919/1997)

This chapter considers the representation of empty urban space in contemporary British cinema. Focusing on London, I am interested in the way Danny Boyle’s zombie-horror film, *28 Days Later* (2002), employs post-apocalyptic panoramas of deserted cityscapes that reinforce an iconic image of the city. My argument is that, despite its deeply uncanny properties, the film’s vision of an undead metropolis nonetheless plays to the aesthetic and commercial needs of the tourist and city-branding industries. To develop this line of thought, I want to begin by placing the motif of the empty city in the broader context of cinema culture, before addressing how *28 Days Later* extends in innovative ways the sort of urban emptiness envisioned by lavish Hollywood productions such as *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001). Seeking to show how such re-imaginings of the city have been an enduring cultural fantasy since the rise of capitalist urbanization, the discussion then draws on Michel de Certeau’s thinking on the erotics of high-rise voyeurism to explore resonances between Boyle’s cinematic cityscape and two very different, yet interconnected, urban texts. The first is William Wordsworth’s London sonnet “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” (1807), one of the first great cityscape poems of urban modernity. The second is the revolving spectacle of the London Eye, the massive Ferris wheel installed
on the South Bank of the Thames and initially conceived as a temporary riverside amusement for the capital’s millennial celebrations.

**URBAN UNCANNY**

Images of empty—or deserted—cityscapes have been a recurring motif of the urban uncanny in film from the silent era onwards. Most notably, *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) contains a number of slow panning shots of a dehumanized, mechanical city virtually devoid of motion and life. In this dystopian, futuristic cityscape, partly conceived as a warning against the geometric tyranny of modernist urban design, the human population is reduced to invisibility and insignificance in the face of the autonomous urban machine. Lang’s vision of a monstrous city of the future was partly inspired, or so the publicity myth goes, by his first encounter in 1924 with the sky-scraping architecture of Manhattan (Elsaesser 9). It is interesting that, in his fantastical cinematic re-imagining of the skyscraper city, Lang relied on the distancing, depopulating perspective of the high-rise view to gain a visual purchase on the modern metropolis, since the same observational technique was also used by many documentary and avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s concerned with recording the sprawl and spectacle of vertical New York.

Among New York films produced in this period, *Manhatta* (Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, 1920), which derives its inspiration and structure from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855), stands out for its vision of an unhomely city, polarized between majestic, vertiginous heights and gloomy, subhuman depths. Crucially, as it goes about chronicling a day in the life of New York, Sheeler and Strand’s six-minute experimental reel repeatedly employs static views of deserted cityscapes in order to capture what they saw as the inherently photographic nature of this paradigmatically modern city. Here, in what quickly becomes a repeated pattern in urban cinema, the motif of the empty city is used to immobilize the urban frenzy and scrutinize it in stasis.

As such aesthetic indulgences suggest images of empty city space have long been a source of visual fascination in films concerned with interpreting the unhomeliness of the city. From *Manhatta* to *Metropolis* and beyond, these images have also had a profound and lasting impact on the “urban imaginary”—what is best understood in Edward Soja’s (2000) terms as “the mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces, and communities in which we live” (324).

A particularly striking example of how this impact on the urban imaginary registers in contemporary film can be found in *Vanilla Sky*, an urban nightmare narrative that prefigures *28 Days Later* in important ways. An American remake of the Spanish film *Abre los Ojos* (Alejandro
Amenàbar (1997), *Vanilla Sky* follows the psychological breakdown of multimillionaire David Aames (Tom Cruise), who becomes lost in a computer-generated dreamworld that allows him to escape the ugliness of his reality. The film opens with a key scene in which Aames drives his vintage black Ferrari into New York’s Times Square during what should be the morning rush hour. Strangely, impossibly, Times Square is completely empty: no people, no traffic, no life. Aames then exits his car and proceeds to run—panicked yet elated—down the middle of the street, finally stopping in the center of Times Square to raise his arms towards the sky and release a wordless scream at the surrounding neon lights and advertising billboards. At this point in the film, there is no explanation for the emptiness, although the experience is later revealed to be a dream within a dream.

The opening of *Vanilla Sky* is significant for several reasons, and all of them relate to the scene’s uncanny properties—to the way that it defamiliarizes Times Square. First, from a production point of view, the scene is remarkable because it does not use computer-generated imagery to create the visual effect of emptiness. Cameron Crowe’s production team managed to secure permission from the Mayor’s Office of Film, Theater, and Broadcasting to close Times Square at four o’clock on a Sunday morning in order to shoot the scene, something that had never been done before on such a large scale. This means that what we see in the opening of *Vanilla Sky* are real images of deserted city space. Yet at the same time, since these images are impossible to experience in any conventional reality, the scene still looks and feels deeply unreal.

The reason for this sense of unreality is, of course, that an integral part of what defines Times Square is conspicuously missing from this scene: the never-ending chaos of crowds and traffic is inexplicably absent. At the same time, however, the visual pandemonium of the enormous electronic screens and neon advertising billboards—which is another defining element of Times Square—remains present, offering the only busyness and movement in the scene apart from Aames’ frantic running. The implication is that the automated consumer spectacle is not only the most important feature of this urban space, but has also acquired a strange, autonomous life of its own, operating and thriving independently of the city’s human involvement.

*Vanilla Sky* enacts a particular urban fantasy that derives from Times Square’s status not only as a global icon of tourism, but also as one of the most commercialized and hypermediated public spaces in the world today. It is, above all, a fantasy of escape and release: escape from the urban crowd and release from the spatial confinements of everyday urban life. In other words, what Aames experiences is the freedom to move alone and unobstructed through the ultimate site of urban congestion and consumer spectacle. The effect is a double sense of exhilaration and anxiety produced by the impossible, disorienting experience of
consuming Times Square—and being consumed by Times Square—in total solitude.

UNDEAD CITIES

In his 1919 essay on the uncanny, Freud finds that the *unheimlich* (literally, the unhomely) is “in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated” (Freud 217). He further suggests that one of the most powerful sources of the uncanny is uncertainty about whether something is alive or dead, so that things which occupy the indeterminate space between life and death possess tremendous power to unnerve. For Freud, this is why “many people experience [the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts” (218).

The images of empty city space in *Vanilla Sky* occupy precisely this liminal space of the undead. Through their manipulation of a deeply familiar view of the cosmopolitan city, they become caught ambiguously between absence and presence, between motion and stasis, and between the spectral and the spectacular. This, of course, is the entire point of the scene. Crowe uses images of empty city space in order to create a disorienting encounter with the familiar rendered strange and alien. It is an experience of wonder and unease that prepares the spectator for the unhinged nature of reality within the world of the film.

These representational strategies are what link New York and *Vanilla Sky* to London and *28 Days Later*, in which images of empty city space are similarly used not simply to defamiliarize and unnerve, but, in the process, to establish the crisis of reality underpinning the premise of the film. An important difference between the two films, however, is that *28 Days Later* takes the idea of an undead metropolis to conceptual and visual extremes. Moreover, as a zombie film, it is concerned quite literally with the undead.

Written by Alex Garland and directed by Boyle, who formerly collaborated on the screen adaptation of Garland’s novel *The Beach* (1997), *28 Days Later* is the product of a creative partnership between two prominent countercultural British voices. Retaining something of the nihilism of Boyle’s *Trainspotting* (1996) and the social cynicism of *The Beach*, the film’s re-interpretation of the zombie-horror genre, which builds on earlier classics like *Omega Man* (Boris Sagal 1971) and *Rabid* (David Cronenberg 1977), uses the trope of the living dead in order to comment on the self-destructive potential of a society consumed by rage and paranoia. In so doing, *28 Days Later* takes obvious pleasure in imagining and presenting its postapocalyptic fantasy.

The film’s savoring of the aesthetics of urban disaster is most pronounced in the opening scenes, beginning when the character of Jim (Cillian Murphy) wakes up in a deserted London hospital after spending twenty-eight
days in a coma. He leaves the hospital and soon discovers that all the surrounding streets and buildings have been abandoned as well. The explanation, which he only learns later in the film, is that a lethal virus released from a research facility has swept across the country while he was comatose, turning most of the human population into enraged, homicidal zombies who have either killed or infected almost everybody. Only a handful of survivors remain. The opening scenes of the film track Jim’s wanderings through the empty city, effectively creating a montage of deserted London landmarks that begins with a panoramic shot of Westminster Bridge (Figure 7.1) and ends with a close-up of Piccadilly Circus. Throughout, London remains completely empty.

As with Crowe’s treatment of Times Square, my interest in Boyle’s cinematic vision of the city derives from its uncanniness—from what Nicholas Royle (2003), adapting Freud, describes in terms of “a peculiar commingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar” resulting in “a sense of homelessness uprooted” (1). First, it is worth noting that, from a production point of view, the empty London scene from *28 Days Later* is even more remarkable than the empty Times Square scene in *Vanilla Sky*, since here as well no computer-generated images were used to create the visual effect of emptiness. And yet, the scene covers a significantly larger geographic area of the city. Shot throughout central London during the early morning hours,

![Westminster Bridge](image_url)  
*Figure 7.1* Westminster Bridge, from *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, United Kingdom, 2002), © 20th Century Fox/Photofest.
what the viewer sees are real images of empty city space. Collected into one continuous sequence in the film, however, those images clearly belong to the realm of the impossible.

Significant here is that, unlike Crowe in *Vanilla Sky*, Boyle uses far more than just one isolated space to envision a fantasy of urban emptiness. Roaming throughout London, he shows a series of deserted city spaces, ranging from Westminster Bridge, the Houses of Parliament, and Downing Street, to Whitehall, Horse Guards Parade, and Piccadilly Circus (London’s Victorian precursor of Times Square). Moreover, the images of these urban landmarks are interspersed with sweeping panoramas of a completely depopulated, motionless city in which even more London icons are showcased, including St Paul’s Cathedral, Oxford Street, and—most notably—the London Eye, whose incongruous circular form reappears in the background of several shots. There is also a brief intertextual moment in which the camera shoots the area around the Bank of England from the elevated point of view of a roof-top figurine, subtly evoking the bird’s-eye Berlin of the angel voyeur in *Wings of Desire* (Wim Wender 1987).

The full effect of Boyle’s treatment of London is that the sense of dislocation and unreality encountered in *Vanilla Sky* is even more pronounced in this extended vision of the deserted city. It is a vision, in other words, that occupies in an even more ambivalent way the indeterminate space of the uncanny. After all, the purpose of the empty London sequence in *28 Days Later* is to create uncertainty as to whether the city is alive or dead, and in the process to locate it somewhere between these two conditions. The deadness of London is suggested by the absence of people and traffic, elements that normally animate the space of cities. Its deadness is also suggested by the residual signs of abandonment and violence: trash and tourist trinkets littered through the streets, looted shops and businesses, luxury cars deserted in the middle of intersections, paper money scattered on the pavement. Perhaps the most poignant image of abandonment and violence comes in the form of an overturned, smashed-up London bus. In the wake of the 2005 London Transport bombings, this film image has acquired a new, heightened significance, particularly in the disturbing way that it both prefigures and resembles the real images of the bus wreckage in Tavistock Square, which were broadcast and printed in news media around the world.

Despite the overwhelming sense of death and stillness, Boyle’s empty London also contains a few moments of movement and sound that gesture towards life. The river gently flows beneath Westminster Bridge. A car alarm suddenly activates on its own. A Benetton billboard shows the fetishized image of smiling yuppies frolicking in brightly colored clothes. And there are the slow shuffle and occasional shouts of the film’s lone pedestrian, Jim, searching for other human life. But these fleeting moments of real and illusory animation only reinforce the larger sense of emptiness and stasis dominating the film’s vision of London—a vision that despite the
many unsettling and disorienting visual elements, nonetheless presents a serene and sublime sight for the accidental tourist.

In creating such a tension between the urban sublime and the urban uncanny, the undead metropolis of *28 Days Later* is very much in tune with the aesthetic and commercial needs of London’s tourist and city-branding industries. This, moreover, is not despite the way the film produces an effect of estrangement. It is actually because of the effect of estrangement. In other words, *28 Days Later* offers another version of the voyeuristic fantasy explored in *Vanilla Sky*—a fantasy that is linked to the iconography of urban tourism, and involves the impossible pleasure of consuming the city in perfect solitude. To develop this idea further, as well as to bring it around to the topic of urban branding and the London Eye, which is the final destination of this chapter, I need to make a short detour via the urban musings of Michel de Certeau and William Wordsworth.

**WESTMINSTER BRIDGE AND THE TWIN TOWERS**

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau famously talks about his experience of visiting the observation deck of the World Trade Center in New York in the late 1970s. Looking out over Manhattan from the summit of a skyscraper, he finds himself “transfigured into a voyeur” (de Certeau 92). In his description of the “voluptuous pleasure [of] seeing the whole,” the gigantic undulating parts of the city become immobilized into a unified, graspable image:

> Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passing over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance of Harlem. A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. [. . .] To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. [. . .] It transforms the bewitching world by which one was “possessed” into a text that lies before one’s eyes. [. . .] To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. [. . .] It transforms the bewitching world by which one was “possessed” into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. [. . .] The 1370-foot high tower that serves as a prow for Manhattan continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text. (91–92)

De Certeau’s urban panorama is marked by several distinctive features. Not least among these is the perception of the rigid geometry of New York’s skyline in terms of motion and fluidity. Another distinctive feature of this
aerial view is that the sense of mobility is simultaneously countered by an effect of immobilization. This frozen, long-distance image of the city is what de Certeau goes on to contrast with the chaos and confinement of the city street: the space and level of everyday life. For de Certeau, the pleasure of high-rise voyeurism lies precisely in the liberation it offers from the quasi-illegible mess of the street, a liberation made possible by the distancing, estranging perspective of the high-rise view.

It is questionable whether such an extreme spatial dichotomy between the vertical and horizontal axes of the city actually holds up under closer scrutiny. In particular, I disagree with de Certeau that the high-rise view offers anything remotely approaching a totalizing image of the city, even if that image does represent, as de Certeau is careful to stress, only an “imaginary totalization” (93). Setting aside this point of contention, however, I do want to draw on de Certeau’s broader idea that the high-rise view produces a depopulated and immobilizing image of the city, frozen in a state of suspended animation, caught somewhere between the living and the dead. For what the viewer encounters in the empty London of 28 Days Later, and in a more limited way in the empty Times Square of Vanilla Sky, is the visual experience of high-rise voyeurism brought down—complete with all its deadening, distancing effects—to the level and space of the city street. Here, as in de Certeau’s narrative of scopic pleasure, the result is not only deeply unnerving, it is also aesthetically appealing.

The strange and borderline-morbid aesthetic draw of the empty city is something that the British Romantic poet William Wordsworth understood and exploited to artistic ends a full two-hundred years before Crowe and Boyle. In his sonnet of urban epiphany, “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1802,” Wordsworth attempts to capture the sublime and uncanny appearance of London’s slumbering form in the early morning hours. To achieve this aim he relies on the panoptic perspective of the cityscape view, offering a vision of London that bears certain similarities to the deserted metropolis of 28 Days Later.

More interesting, Wordsworth observes the city from the exact perspective that comes to dominate its pictorial representation in both high art and tourist ephemera in the centuries that follow. In what becomes a prevalent city view from the turn of the nineteenth century onwards, London is seen from Westminster Bridge looking north across the Thames towards Parliament, the City, and St Paul’s. In other words, Wordsworth sees the city from almost the exact location and perspective as the opening shot of the empty London sequence in 28 Days Later. And while the view of his poem has yet to include either the 1840s neo-gothic excess of the rebuilt Parliament buildings or the grandiose architectural folly of the London Eye—both of which feature prominently in Boyle’s cinematic cityscape—it does nonetheless contain the underlying shape and structure of London’s postmillennial riverside skyline:
Earth has not any thing to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!
(W. Wordsworth, 1807, 118)

Wordsworth may be writing about the proto-modern London of 1802, but he could just as easily be describing Boyle’s postapocalyptic London of 2002. The poem itself was inspired by a chance visual encounter with the sleeping city during an early morning stagecoach ride. Crossing Westminster Bridge on his way to Dover, Wordsworth happened to glance back at the London riverfront from the roof of the coach and was struck by the splendor of the silent city in the unusually clear air (Barker 2000: 301).

Dorothy Wordsworth (2002), who accompanied her brother on the trip, vividly recalls the scene in her journal:

It was a beautiful morning. The City, St Paul’s, with the River & a multitude of little Boats, made a most beautiful sight as we crossed Westminster Bridge. The houses were not overhung by their cloud of smoke & they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly with such a pure light that there was even something like the purity of one of nature’s own grand Spectacles. (123)

This journal entry is important not just because it offers a prose counterpoint to her brother’s poem, but also because there is evidence to suggest that he may have relied on details from her description to reconstruct the empty London of his sonnet (Reed 188). Whatever Wordsworth’s artistic debt to his sister (and this would not have been the first time he depended on her keen observational eye to strengthen his writing), both the poem and the journal entry see the aesthetic marvel of the sleeping city in almost identical terms as a spectacle of nature, not of the city. Indeed, what enables the ungainly urban sprawl to be transformed into a placid natural landscape in the imagination of both observers is precisely the absence of the city’s human population and, through this absence, all
other signs of urban life, including the blanket of smoke normally smothering the daytime London of the early 1800s.

An even more striking parallel between Wordsworth’s poem and Boyle’s film, however, is that both present London explicitly in terms of undeath. In Wordsworth’s writing, the city is anthropomorphized and brought to life only to stress its paradoxical look of lifelessness. Like de Certeau’s vertical New York, Wordsworth’s horizontal London is depopulated and immobilized by the voyeuristic urban gaze. Even the city’s heart has ceased to beat, as if the whole of London were momentarily caught in a state of suspended animation. Here, as in 28 Days Later, a tension is created by the anticipation of the deadened metropolitan body coming back to life. The point of Wordsworth’s uncanny urban vision, moreover, is essentially the same: to make us see the everyday metropolis in an unusual, defamiliarized way. In this case, Wordsworth seeks to capture an aesthetic wonder available only to the solitary onlooker and visible only in that ephemeral, early morning moment just before the city wakes up and starts the working day.

As it happens, to capture the twenty-first century city looking similarly motionless and deserted, Boyle shot most of his film’s empty London sequence (including the Westminster Bridge scene) during the same short interval between dawn and the start of the morning commute—that other source of the urban uncanny famously described by T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land (1922/1961) as a spectacle of the undead: “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many” (43). Undead cities may be a recurring aesthetic concern in modern and contemporary film but, as Wordsworth’s lifeless metropolis and Eliot’s zombie commuterscape suggest, it is a concern that also preoccupies cultural production in other fields, and that belongs to a long line of critique aimed at addressing the nature of urban life and extending back well beyond the relatively short-lived moment of modernism to the rise of capitalist urbanization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

LONDON EYES

To bring my discussion more fully into dialogue with this book’s overarching concern with urban branding, I want to consider next how the undead London of Wordsworth’s poetry and, in a more indirect way, the undead London of Boyle’s film have recently been co-opted by the city’s tourist industry, contributing to the emergence of a particular branded image of London. The site of this urban branding is the London Eye, one of the city’s newest and most popular tourist attractions, and arguably an iconic centerpiece of the capital’s postmillennial skyline. In fact, the prominence of the Millennium Wheel (as it is also known) in London’s contemporary urban imaginary is graphically registered in 28 Days Later, where its
ghostly silhouette haunts the background of almost every panoramic shot, as if to suggest that the entire city is subject to the prying gaze of this giant revolving eye.

For instance, the film contains a long still shot of Horse Guards Parade, in which the London Eye ominously outwrides the squat government buildings, creating the impression that the oversized observation wheel, the largest in the world at the time of its construction, has placed the capital under aerial surveillance. The Eye later reappears in a wide-angle shot of Tottenham Court Road, effectively highlighting its seeming omnipresence within the city. Finally, of course, the Eye dominates the film’s riverfront panoramas, where its towering vertical mass, facing out towards the North Bank, overshadows the seat of British government. The care Boyle takes to include the London Eye in so many different shots of the city comments on more than the hypervisibility of this distinctive urban landmark. It also evokes the Eye’s visual perspective on the city, implicitly connecting the high-rise experience produced by the wheel to the film’s undead rendering of the city.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the London Eye experience, however, is not the aerial view itself but, rather, the way visitors are ideologically primed for this view by being ushered past the text of Wordsworth’s cityscape poem, which has been monumentalized in large stainless steel letters near the entrance to the wheel (Figure 7.2). The idea is not just to give the Eye added significance by linking it to London’s cultural heritage and the creative product of a treasured national icon. The poem also invites visitors to see the city from the Eye in precisely Wordsworth’s undead terms—as the sort of strangely empty, still, and silent metropolis also envisioned by Boyle in 28 Days Later.

In this respect, the London Eye actively promotes a similar fantasy of urban voyeurism and escape in which the individual is unhinged from the everyday space and experience of the city. As with the Twin Towers in de Certeau’s thinking, the wheel offers an overview through which spectators, sealed within their air-conditioned observation capsules, become temporarily empowered with a panoptic aerial gaze. Seen from 135 meters above the ground, the sprawling mass of London is immobilized, distanced, and defamiliarized.

The Eye’s press office describes the effect as “a new and exciting perspective on the city” that also introduces “a new [. . .] sense of calm into the chaos of the city” (London Eye Press Pack 3). Presumably attempting to illustrate this strange dynamic between stimulation and pacification, the Eye’s 2007 press pack includes a series of panoramic photographs of London, showing daytime views from the top of the wheel in all four compass-point directions. More interesting, the serial presentation and letter-box shape of these photographs are strongly reminiscent of film stills, almost as if to suggest that they represent the proto-cinematic flickerings of a screened event. In turn, the images themselves, showing vast, depopulated
urban vistas of central London, could easily be inserted directly into Boyle’s empty-city montage in *28 Days Later* without looking out of place.

These resonances between the city views of *28 Days Later* and the London Eye are not entirely coincidental. After all, as we have seen, Boyle repeatedly evokes the Eye’s visual perspective on the city in the framing and composition of his deserted cityscapes. In other words, he clearly has the view from the Eye in mind while filming London. This makes sense if we consider that, as in the opening of Boyle’s film, the main objective of the London Eye is to engineer a visual encounter with the urban uncanny—with the everyday city made newly strange. When it comes to high-rise voyeurism, however, the Eye is hardly exceptional in this respect. In fact, as Mark Dorrian (2006) has argued, generating such forms of sensory disorientation and exhilaration has been the guiding principal of all the “iconic ascensional apparatuses of modernity,” including the original Ferris wheel inaugurated at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 (19). What is perhaps less conventional about the Eye is that, by placing Wordsworth’s poem at the entrance to the ride, the operators are publicly asserting in a self-conscious and intertextual way that, despite its uncanny properties, the empty city produced by the wheel’s orbital experience should be

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*Figure 7.2* Wordsworth inscription at the London Eye, 2005, courtesy Sheldon Wood.
seen and savored as an aesthetic marvel: “a sight so touching in its majesty [that] Earth has not anything to show more fair” (W. Wordsworth 118).

The way in which the London Eye composes and disseminates its overview of the city becomes even more significant if we consider that the tourist attraction opened under the corporate sponsorship of British Airways (BA). In fact, the full, official name of the attraction is the BA London Eye. To reinforce this link between the airline and the wheel, visitors are explicitly encouraged to think of their ride as a BA flight. In the promotional discourse of the Eye, visitors become “passengers” who “check in” for “flights.” Further paralleling contemporary airline practices, London Eye passengers are also instructed that, in view of heightened security, a minimum of carry-on “luggage” will be allowed on board flights.

The consequence of British Airways’ involvement with the Millennium Wheel is that this corporate giant of pan-global aviation has branded much more than a tourist attraction. Both the wheel’s high-rise view and—more important—the way of looking at that view are branded as well. This idea is overtly articulated by the London Eye’s distinctly cosmopolitan advertising slogan: “The way the world sees London.” It is a slogan that stresses British Airways’ proprietary claim over not only the view of the wheel, but also the view from the wheel. More to the point, if the slogan is right that the London Eye represents the way the world sees London—and this is becoming increasingly true in both real and symbolic ways—then the commercialized panopticism of this massive mechanical wheel is in fact producing the dominant globalized image of the city. Although British Airways is unlikely to see it in these terms, it is a branded image characterized by the fundamentally uncanny nature of its urban aesthetic.

In 2006, British Airways sold its shareholdings in the London Eye Company to the Tussauds Group, a prominent purveyor of mass tourism in the United Kingdom, whose corporate identity is rooted in London’s original waxworks museum. Although the airline still maintains its brand involvement and corporate sponsorship, Tussauds is now entirely responsible for day-to-day operations. Given the Eye’s urban aesthetic, it is somehow quite fitting, and not a little ironic, that the tourist attraction has come under the management of a leisure and entertainment company made famous—through the uncanny likenesses of its celebrity wax doppelgangers—by staging sensational encounters with the undead.

The broader implication is that the mass appeal of the London Eye and the astonishing speed with which it has become an established urban icon suggest that an important part of what we seek in the cosmopolitan space of cities is precisely the defamiliarizing visual experience described in Wordsworth’s poem and later re-imagined in Boyle’s film. Whether produced through film, literature, or even the urban spectaculars of mass tourism, the voyeuristic fantasy of the empty city exerts a powerful hold over the cultural imagination. It is a fascination derived not only from the oddly compelling experience of estrangement, but also from the perception of
beauty involved in that aesthetic encounter. For what is ultimately shared by the undead London of Danny Boyle, William Wordsworth, and the London Eye is a strange yet beautiful vision of the everyday metropolis caught between the living and the dead.

NOTES

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