

Time and Notions

I hadn't realised that the notion of a 'neutron bomb' had become common currency before the 1970s, yet here is the radiation-obsessed Doctor Who donnishly and chillingly referring to its effects in December 1963: it kills organisms, he explains, but leaves other structures upright. BSB's Galaxy channel is currently rerunning *Doctor Who* from the very beginning, and what strikes you is how astonishingly prophetic the series is, as though adumbrating an agenda for the coming three decades. It reads now like a highly astute parable about the unchecked power of technology (forged at a time when romantic attachment to scientific expansionism was reaching its height), and it's anticipatory of all manner of contemporary issues—environmentalism, feminism, nuclear despoilation, familial fissuring, totalitarianism, feeding the world, racialism, 'terrorism'. For anyone now aged between 30 and 35 who saw them the first time round, the stories boomerang back at you through time with the force of psychoanalytic revelation, like some sort of Kleinian key to the moral and political architecture of a thirtysomething's life.

The original scenario and characters in *Doctor Who* seem, by today's popular sci-fi standards, relentlessly 'low concept'. The Doctor (William Hartnell) is a supercilious and infirm old coot—a near charlatan, full of aloof misanthropy and crabby scheming, quite unlike the reassuring elder-brother and uncle role-models who succeeded him in the part. With his lapel-thumbing, Edwardian-schoolmaster posturing, broken teeth, Rupert Bear trousers and irritating existential musings, he's forever either apologising ('I'm sorry, it's all my fault, I'm desperately sorry') or trying to abandon the others to their fate ('You treat everybody and everything as less important than yourself!' as Barbara, played by Jacqueline Hill, berates him).

His adolescent granddaughter, Susan (Carole Ann Ford), is a trapped Victorian heroine; the Doctor admits that he doesn't understand her, and her eldritch shrieks at moments of danger seem as much rerouted expressions of helplessness within this repressive relationship as reaction to the perils at hand. Barbara and Ian, the young adults whom the Doctor and Susan inadvertently hijack from Earth, are square-minded suburbanites from the London of 1963 who aren't interested in the outer reaches of time and space; show them everything Einstein dreamed of, and they'd be worried about missing the first day of the Bromley sales. They're depressing products of postwar British materialism: they have no sense of wonder, however much the Doctor tries to instil one in occasional moments of poetic arousal ('If you could touch the alien sand and hear the cries of strange birds, and watch them wheel in



Time gentleman pleased: William Hartnell

another sky—would that satisfy you?'). Ian (William Russell) starts out as a stuffed Gannex mac—in fact, worse still, it's a stuffed 'shortie' Gannex mac. (Underneath there's a buttoned-up cardigan.) Barbara announces, with a certain suburban poignancy, 'I'm afraid I'm a very unwilling adventurer', but when the Tardis alights for the first time in a new world, it's Ian who has to be physically supported by Susan as they step reluctantly across the threshold of time. There's not, however, much in the way of bonding between the characters—all the relationships in the series appear blocked and crumbly in the extreme.

The women are by no means hysterical cupcakes. Susan and Barbara both have short hair and wear slacks, and they're reasonably equal participants in the decision-making and the rough stuff; you can see them bridling a little as the Doctor calls them 'child' and 'my dear'. In the opening Stone Age escapade, it's the calculating palaeolithic women who catalyse events, even though they're treated like currency by their menfolk. The four tetchy time-travellers are captured by the cavemen and then escape, but of primary interest is the symbolic debate that's woven around the issue of fire-making. The cavemen haven't got fire, yet rival chieftains need it as a virility device, to cement an authoritarian social structure, and to facilitate military adventurism. The Doctor and Co are happy to provide combustion as the price of their freedom, but a note of prophetic doom is sounded by an aged Stone Age Cassandra (who shortly afterwards has her head stove in). 'Fire will kill us all in the end,' inveighs the crone.

Metaphors about technological holocausts are made even more explicit as the Tardis thuds down on Skaro, home of the Daleks—a vision of the white-hot Sixties machine age

gone disastrously wrong. The planet was fossilised 500 years ago as a result of a massive nuclear war; yet, Gaia-like, it's regenerated itself in bizarre and ironical ways. The former warrior race, the Thals, have mutated into peace-loving Venus-and-Adonis types, whose food supply is running low. The Daleks, once Socratic-minded, are now transmogrified into murderous, hideous blobs encased in metal. As far as the viewer is concerned, the fluty-voiced Thals are clearly victims of the sort of neutron bomb where people stay standing but their ability to act convincingly in a piece of drama is destroyed: they're like D'Oyly Carte extras dressed in bunny-girl outfits and sub-Mary Quant anorak-leotards. They tell the Daleks, 'The time for enmity is past', naively reasoning that 'in the [Dalek] city there is enough food for us and the Daleks a hundred times over'.

In each of the Skaro episodes, action sequences are balanced with ardent philosophical debates about tribal co-existence and nobility versus cowardice, in which concepts like 'pacifism' are openly discussed. The New Ager Thals are all for *détente* and trade talks with the Daleks—while the Daleks hatch a plot to release colossal amounts of new radiation into the atmosphere by cracking open a nuclear reactor, arguing: 'We do not have to adapt to the environment—we will change the environment to suit us.' The Thals' dander is finally agitated in a vertical direction by none other than the wallyish Ian, who all of a sudden discovers reserves of insight, fortitude and the latent mentality of a guerrilla beneath the Terylene exterior. The Daleks are *afraid* of the Thals, he diagnoses, 'because you're different from them'. While the Thals prevaricate over the question of non-violence, Ian grabs one of the Thal women as if to make off with her into the woods. He's knocked flying by her Thal paramour. 'So there *is* something you'll fight for!' Ian declares, triumphant. He's forged a link between self-respect and 'direct action'; now the Thal chief concludes, 'There is no indignation in being afraid to die—but there is a terrible shame in being afraid to live.'

In the final showdown, the Daleks seem victims of their own anal-retentiveness. They spend so much time asserting dominance and barking orders at each other that they're trapped in a kind of epistemological paralysis: their former skills as creative thinkers have entirely deserted them. But when the Thals and the time-travellers overpower them in their Magnox-reactor control-room, there is no sense of triumph—no gung-ho whooping it up in the manner of the good guys in a *Star Wars* movie. It's been a grim, messy, physical struggle: one Thal lies seriously wounded, and the metal limbs of the Daleks are twisted half out of their sockets, like the wings of a bird the cat brought in. The Thals are rueful and

No Half Measures

troubled. 'If only there'd been some other way,' broods Ganatus (Philip Bond).

As the time-travellers depart from Skaro, the Thals aren't crestfallen. Barbara kisses Ganatus almost full on the mouth, but the Police Box has hardly brought with it celestial peace and wisdom. Rather, as in the Stone Age story, it's brought severe cultural disturbance, sparked initially by the Doctor's high-handed descent into the Dalek city to scrounge mineral resources—mercury, for the 'fluid link' that keeps his wretched Tardis careering disruptively through the dimensions.

Needless to say, everybody in *Doctor Who* speaks Carshalton English and nobody ever goes to the lavatory. At times, the science is refreshingly free from the airy techno-babble of much contemporary 'sf' material (the Tardis, for example, registers its position in history on a dial known as the 'year-o-meter'), while at others it's irredeemably hokey. You can never get your mind round the way that the interior of the doors to the Tardis don't match up to the exterior of the doors, nor to the information that the Tardis can potentially materialise in any shape or form—as a sedan chair, say, or a tumble-drier. The Daleks, of course, are powered improbably by static electricity which comes up through the floor. This was presumably at the period when people first realised you could get a shock by scuffing your feet across a synthetic carpet and then touching a fridge or a filing cabinet; perhaps the Dalek power generator consisted of a giant revolving drum covered with Crossley twist-pile. Sometimes it's almost as though the series is of a mind to sidestep strict 'realism' and sidle towards a fantastical-satirical Kurt Vonnegut type of science, but you can't be sure of this. All that's certain is that it's profoundly odd, rampantly allegorical, and completely *sui generis*—aeons removed from the pantomimic and derivative kitsch of the present-day version.

Both writing and direction mix moments of rich eloquence with moments of scrappy duffness: small-scale visual coups alternate with larger-scale set-pieces which can resemble *Dune* as staged in the weather studio. The grisly, drawn-out violence still has the power to chill to the marrow, and the terror is both physical and symbolic. In the Stone Age story, we hear the screams of a caveman being savaged by a wild beast, and then see his bleeding and severely lacerated body; later, the time-travellers place flaming torches inside human skulls to put the wind up the natives. It's hard to think of more devastating traumata for young children.

On Skaro, as Ian, Barbara and some Thals trek through the mutant-infested caves behind the Dalek city, one of the weedier Thals breaks down in fear and tries to go back. He's told to pull himself together, but soon afterwards he loses his footing as he leaps across a ravine, and is left dangling and hollering at the end of a rope. The rest try to hold on to the other end, but they're in danger of toppling over, too. Then the 'cowardly' Thal performs a remarkable act. He pulls out a knife, cuts his own lifeline, and saves the others by consigning himself, with a blood-freezing screech, to the bowels of the petrified planet. I can't explain why, but this incident harrowed and haunted me when first shown as though my unformed infant soul had been flipped over like a tiddlywink. It haunts me still. ■

How to avoid a mid-life crisis: steer clear of younger women, don't get roped in to write the Christmas panto and, above all, keep drinking. These are just three lessons that could be extracted from Nigel Baldwin's *Show Me the Way, Ugly Angels* (Radio 3), a drama which traced, not for the first time, the decline, fall and regeneration of a polytechnic lecturer. It goes without saying that his is a 'third-rate' polytechnic (no others exist in fiction), that our hero, Jack, lectures in the Film and Media Studies department, has just been left by his wife, and is, when we discover him, 'lurching from alcoholic depression to alcoholic depression'. We would expect nothing less of a polytechnic lecturer: it goes with the job.

However, he has also been persuaded to write the departmental panto and, it would seem, has rather let rip with the project. The action of the play is punctuated by strident and over-insistent scenes in which Jack features as Cinders, his two colleagues are camp guardian angels (aka 'Pinky and Perky'), and Jack's dilemma is enacted in terms of traditional pantomime horseplay. It is a familiar story: Jack (vigorously played by Struan Rodger) falls for sexy student Sonia, it doesn't work out, wife wants to come back, Jack just wants out of it all. But there were twists, notably Sonia's proclaimed belief in reincarnation and her alleged regression under hypnosis. This is all an act but it leads Jack to an apparently genuine out-of-body experience and a regression of his own, after which he comes off the booze, resigns, changes his mind, loses Sonia, rejects his wife, and decides to go bumming round Italy alone.

Apart from the pantomime intrusions, this managed to be a thoroughly entertaining piece, hurtling along with tremendous energy both in the acting and the writing—a fine succession of lurid rows, crack-ups and confrontations. Unfortunately, it came to rest in an over-familiar terminus, signalled by Jack's repetitive rants about 'the system'—'we educate people to conform to a society that's rotten'... 'a putrefying bunch of imposed values' and so on. But Nigel Baldwin can certainly write, and indeed overwrite ('pubic hair mocking from the chocolate groin') and *Show Me the Way* had the welcome feel of a drama conceived and composed entirely in radio terms. Baldwin has a natural feel for the medium which promises well. In fact, he has already won a Sony award for his radio adaptation of *The Bass Saxophone*.

Crying in the Crypt (Radio 4) by Richard Walker also exhibited a sure touch. Ian Holm and Anne Stallybrass played Edward and Celia, two strangers who meet by chance in a country church. It is an awkward encounter between stiff, reserved, quietly desperate people, both middle-aged, alone and somehow thwarted. The initial exchanges were

written, acted and directed with just the right nifty precision and delicacy. It sounded like a Barbara Pym novel—two genteel church-crawlers brought together by a shared knowledge of the Book of Proverbs.

But soon we were heading for darker waters, as the couple went off to investigate the sound of a child's anguished crying in the crypt. Things began to overheat as Edward, a vicar's son, plunged into his wretched, guilt-ridden childhood and the fragile rapport with Celia was soon collapsing. However, somewhat implausibly, the play ended with a strong suggestion of a little happiness in the offing for them both. This was a piece which came close to falling apart in its later stages—a common radio drama phenomenon—but it pulled through, thanks in large part, I suspect, to Cherry Cookson's ultra-sensitive direction.

Ian Holm, fastidious and haunted as ever, was back in the first episode of the new Classic Serial (stretching the term again, I fear), *The Quiet American* (Radio 4). Graham Greene adapts particularly well to radio as so much depends on the narrative tone of voice. Gregory Evans' version of this tale of prelapsarian Vietnam is content to rely on whole slabs of unadorned narration and, in the circumstances, this is quite forgivable. The stately pace of this tour of Greenland is sometimes a little soporific, but the overall effect of a relaxing steambath is enhanced by the sweaty, subtropical sound of the thing.

Here is the burnt-out English journalist (Holm, of course), here is vermouth-cassis and opium galore—Greene leading listeners astray with his loving evocation of the pleasures of the poppy. Here is the police chief with the cryptic manner and the overripe accent, and the anomie and the accidie and all the spiritual afflictions, of which love is the strangest of all, since the women who inspire it barely seem to exist. Oh yes, the fans will love it.

Radio 3 is continuing to delve rewardingly among the roots of black music—well, jazz, blues and gospel anyway: they haven't yet ventured as far as soul, let alone rap or hip-hop or house but, given time, who knows? The latest excursion is a variant: *The Big White Chiefs*. As the name suggests, it examines the appropriation of early jazz and ragtime by white musicians. Mel Hill, who combines a lifeless delivery with a sharp turn of phrase and formidable erudition, began with the egregious cornet player, Nick La Rocca.

He it was who, with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, cut the first commercially released jazz record in 1917, which also became the first million-seller. La Rocca, 'a natural recruit for the awkward squad', fell from grace when black jazz belatedly took over. But, as Hill pointed out, it was no mean achievement for a man who 'couldn't even play a decent improvised solo' to write himself into jazz history. ■