

Televised Science Fiction in the United Kingdom during the 1960s

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Abstract

In this essay I attempt to look at the environment of British television broadcasting from the point of view of science fiction, giving a brief overview of some of the main shows of the 1960s as well as looking at the background which led to a proliferation of fantasy and sci-fi during this decade.

1 Science fiction

Science fiction, or sci-fi, is a term which continuously escapes accurate definition. Originally referring to fiction which was specifically written to explore the fantasies that scientific progress could offer, as in stories by Jules Verne, the use of the term has evolved and developed to describe a wide range of fantastic, odd or imaginative. The border between science fiction, fantasy, horror and other forms of so called *speculative fiction* is a vague one at best. Indeed there are an increasing number of books such as Philip K Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*[2] — a tale of drug addiction and its consequences — of which there is little if any scientific fantasy, or where any such elements are merely plot devices.

Generally it could be stated that science fiction is currently a term that can be used to describe any venture into a universe which is not necessarily our own. Elements of fantasy, while often left unexplained, are thought to have some technical or scientific behind them.

The term itself first appeared in 1851 in William Wilson's book *A Little Earnest Book upon a Great Old Subject* with the quote:

“[Thomas] Campbell says that 'Fiction in poetry is not the reverse of truth, but her soft and enchanting resemblance.' Now this applies especially to Science-Fiction, in which the revealed truths of Science may be given interwoven with a pleasing story which may itself be poetical and true—thus circulating a knowledge of the Poetry of science clothed in a garb of the Poetry of Life.”

Despite this early appearance of the term it would not reach general use before Hugo Gernsback popularised it with his magazine *Amazing Stories* [8].

2 Traditions of British sci-fi literature

The United Kingdom has a great role in the development of science fiction, with many well-known authors having a marked impact on the genre throughout its history. Some important works which should be mentioned are:

- *Frankenstein* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. Occasionally claimed to be the first actual science fiction novel [4]
- *Flatland* by Edwin Abbott Abbott. A story of the world seen from the perspective of two-dimensional beings[3]
- Several books by H.G. Wells
- *2001: A Space Odyssey* by Arthur C. Clarke.
- *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell [5]

3 A brief history of televised fantasy

With this rich literary background it is not surprising to find Britain playing a significant role in the development of science fiction on the television. On the Wikipedia[1] several articles mention that a BBC production of Karel Capek's R.U.R. in 1938 was the first ever production of televised science fiction. I was unable to verify this claim elsewhere but that was a very early year for TV so the statement is quite plausible. Unfortunately this production was not recorded but broadcast live and only studio photos remain.

This was followed in later years by many TV adaptations such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the *The Time Machine*. However, the first real sci-fi drama show which was not an adaptation and which was created for an adult audience was *The Quatermass Experiment*, which was broadcast in 1953 on the BBC. This haunting production, followed by *Quatermass II* (1955) and *Quatermass and the Pit*, (1958) held the nation spellbound as alien creatures took over the host. The plot and buildup in this serial was to impact much of science fiction many years later. These, as many other British dramas of the time, were broadcast live.

Much of *The Quatermass Experiment* has been lost. Episodes were to be telerecorded but only the first two remain and are of poor quality (it is not known whether more were actually recorded). *Quatermass II*, however, exists in its entirety and is fascinating with its innovative special effects, atmospheric direction and top-class acting. It is no wonder it became a hit, being scary enough to warrant having a warning placed before each episode [7]. Each of the serials was then later made into a film.

4 The 1960s

With the new influence of the youth during the 1960s bold new directions were taken on the television screens. With the added competition of independent television, producers were keen to explore new concepts and ideas. Futuristic design became a part of every day life and youth culture. Science fiction itself

began to develop into something not only concerned with attacks by alien races, transforming itself into a venue for posing philosophical questions and to play with psychological drama. New developments in electronic music lent itself to the atmospheres of the beyond. The whole period is characterised by an explosion of idealism, change and imagination. A sure breeding ground for the development of rich dramatic experiments. In fact, it could be stated that sci-fi as a whole symbolises the wild, bounderlessboundless dreams of the period.

One aspect that should definitely not be forgotten was the raging space race, which continued well into the 60s. This was sure to capture the imagination of the people at the time and to generate more interest in anything related to space exploration. Perhaps one of the problems with the Apollo programme was that after the first landing, subsequent missions simply could no longer thrill in the same sense that films and TV serials could, week after week.

This period was seen as a revitalising period for the whole of TV. A period of bright new ideas and innovation. As the book *Box of Delights* states:

“Without doubt, the sixties were the outstanding decade for British television. Besides ‘Steptoe’ and ‘Till Death’, the BBC produced such comedy classics as ‘Sykes’, ‘Here’s Harry’, ‘It’s a Square World’, ‘The Likely Lads’, ‘Dad’s Army’ and the incomparable ‘Monty Python’. Johnny Speight reflects: ‘On certain nights of the week, you’d only watch BBC — the programmes were so good. The streets used to be emptied by television.’ Indeed, when ‘The Forsyte Saga’ was at its peak, pubs were deserted and many churches switched the times of their evening services in order not to clash with it.” [10, p.109]

4.1 Agents, comedy and action

Elements of sci-fi during this period were not limited to genre material itself but influenced many productions of the time. Mad scientists and futuristic constructions reached all aspects of the entertainment business. James Bond would employ gadgets of which several seemed past the technical capabilities of the time and others would follow suit.

Perhaps the most remarkable of this period was *The Avengers* (1961), a fast-paced action series with often absurd plotlinesplot lines. It told of secret agents continuously working to save Britain and the world and was mixed with a heap of charm and eccentricity. Science fiction would begin to play an important part of later episodes with weird and humorous stories.

The real cross-over series, however, was *The Prisoner* (1967). A bizarre tale of an agent who decides to resign and finds himself on an odd island resort where everyone is referred to as a number. While not science fiction in the most strictest of senses, many of the episodes had strong undercurrents of surrealism to them, with gadgets and stories which bordered on the sane, especially towards the end of the series. The Prisoner has kept a strong cult following since its inception and is an important milestone in TV history, influencing many paranoid series to follow, including *The X-Files* and, most obviously, *Nowhere Man*.

Science fiction elements influenced comedy too where particularly the hugely successful *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (1969) used various such aspects intertwined with all the rest of the absurd humour. Terry Gilliam, who created

the animations for Monty Python, later went on to direct several sci-fi films, including *Twelve Monkeys*.

4.2 Gerry and Sylvia Anderson

Working as husband and wife, the Andersons created a stream of famous sci-fi action series, several of which used innovative puppet techniques which would soon become famous throughout the industry.

The first series of this kind was called *Supercar* (1961). It used a special technique called supermarionation which allowed good synchronisation of the puppets' mouths to spoken dialogue. It is interesting that Gerry Anderson was not particularly keen on them and used them because of budgetary limitations and on the way to making live action TV.

This was then followed by *FireBall XL5* (1962) and *Stingray* (1964). Both of which became great successes. FireBall XL5 was about a rocket of the same name. Stingray, on the other hand, was about a submarine and was the first British children's series to be filmed in colour and advanced puppetry techniques and special effects to a whole new level, creating very impressive illusions of an underwater world.

The greatest success of all was the famous *Thunderbirds* (1965). Combined with a substantial budget and new advances in puppetry, Thunderbirds was and still is a huge success worldwide. It told of a secret rescue team who operated internationally and in space with a high-tech rescue ship. What was unique about Thunderbirds, and the other Gerry Anderson series before it, was how it became popular in the US as well as the UK. Despite the success of British products in other media, for some reason this was never as true with TV shows.

Gerry Anderson did finally get a chance to work on the dream of creating a live action series with *UFO* (1970). While retaining a cult following it never quite reached the wide-spread popularity of Thunderbirds.

4.3 Doctor Who

This was by far the most important genre series of the era on British television. Originally it was envisioned to be an educational drama series mainly targettingtargeting a younger or family audience (albeit uniquely created at the BBC drama department and not the children's). However, the series quickly expanded its audience to become the most popular sci-fi series ever on British TV.

The setting for the series bordered on the absurd, yet it perhaps worked by treating it with a serious attitude. It tells of an ancient, alien person, only referred to as The Doctor, who travels through time and space in his ship called the TARDIS (for Time And Relative Dimensions In Space). This ship was masked to look like an old British police box on the outside and was much bigger in dimensions on the inside. These features, combined to the way the main character, the Doctor, could regenerate into a new appearance (in other words, a new actor), guaranteed that the series would have longevity and renewal abilities that would last for 26 seasons, until 1989. A length which has yet to be rivalled by any other sci-fi series.

The series started with the episode *An Unearthly Child* on the 23rd of November, 1963. This was the day after John F Kennedy was murdered [9].

This first moment of Doctor Who is widely considered to be fantastic. The atmosphere in it is mysterious and eerie, the acting is spot on, the characters are interesting and the direction captures everything perfectly. Of particular importance is the first appearance of the famous theme tune. Composed by Ron Grainer and implemented by the inventive Delia Derbyshire (at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop), it too created a wonderful sense of mystery out of rudimentary electronics and sound. Definitely one of the most memorable pieces of music to hit British TV, it would haunt the imagination of generations to come. As Box of Delights puts it:

“Ever since the tragic event in Dallas on 22 November 1963, a question regularly posed throughout the world has been: ‘What were you doing on the day Kennedy was shot?’ In addition to providing the answer to that, millions of Britons know exactly what they were doing the day after his assassination: they were watching the first episode of the BBC’s strange new science-fiction serial, ‘Dr Who’.”
[10, p.72]

The second story introduced the iconic *Daleks* (see figure 1). These half-organic, half-machine beings of completely ruthless nature became an instant hit, doubling the viewing figures of Doctor Who and becoming the first cross-over merchandising wonder for the BBC [11]. The Daleks in fact became so popular that the fad was referred to as *Dalekmania*, with posters and toys and even comics available [13]. The word Dalek even made it into the Oxford English Dictionary. They, along with the character of the Doctor, gave way to two feature length films (which nonetheless altered various aspects of the show).

Over the years Doctor Who went from strength to strength and its popularity only declined when it was well into the 80s, with increased competition, reduced budgets and management problems. At its peak episodes like *City of Death*, written by Douglas Adams, received viewing figures of up to 16 million in the UK — an incredible feat for a genre programme [14].

It is interesting to note, in the context of Doctor Who, that not only did science fiction affect aspects of agent films and series but the reverse was also true. As Doctor Who entered the seventies with a new actor as the main character, Jon Pertwee, there was a concentrated effort to bring more of the special agent gadgetry and plot into the series. The third Doctor was stranded on Earth and forced (much to his dislike) to help a special military branch of the UN called U.N.I.T, which was given the task of defending Earth from extraterrestrial influence [12].

Despite its long history it appears Doctor Who has not experienced its last regeneration. At the time of writing the BBC is working on a new high-profile, high-budget continuation of the original series with influential writers and talented contributors.

4.4 Others

Perhaps one worthy mention is *A for Andromeda* (1961), which describes how a message from space arrives on Earth to describe the specifications of a new kind of supercomputer, which is then built. Unfortunately a lot of this series has been destroyed, along with many others, but once again the BBC shows how it can take sci-fi seriously and create it for an intelligent, adult audience.

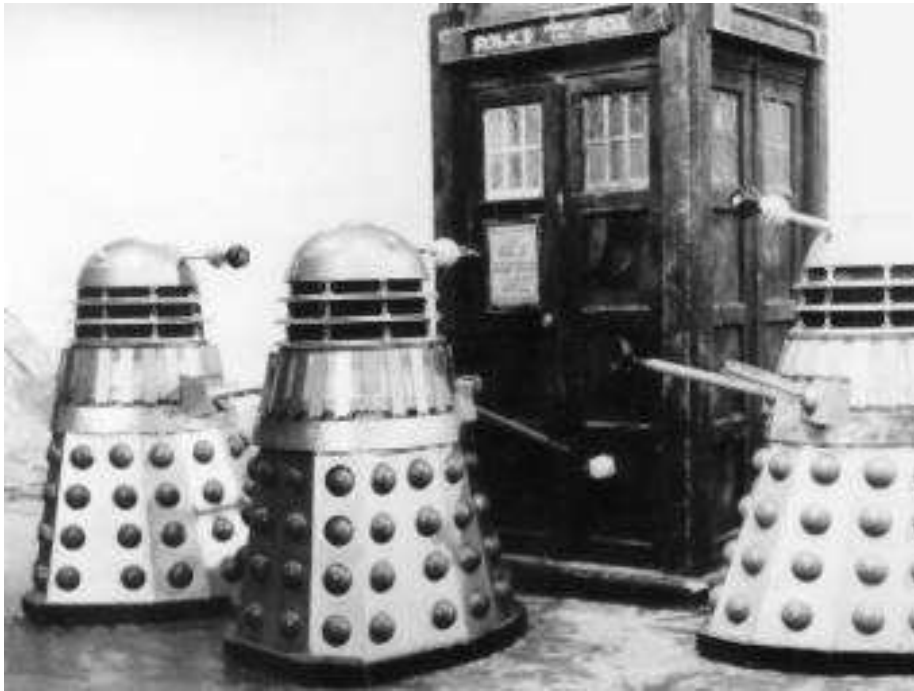


Figure 1: Daleks from the Doctor Who story *The Chase* (Copyright BBC)

Of some interest is the series *Target Luna* (1960) and the following *Pathfinders in Space* (1960), *Pathfinders to Mars* (1960) and *Pathfinders to Venus* (1961). These children's science fantasy series were written and produced by Sydney Newman, who would then go on to create *Doctor Who*.

Some American influence could be seen with the series *Out of The Unknown* (1965), which copied the anthology model used in series such as *Twilight Zone* for a British audience. *British Television* describes it as one of the last, great genre anthologies and goes on to mention that Ridley Scott was a designer for one of its episodes [15].

These are just a few of the series which deserve mentioning here.

5 Conclusions

The 1960s was a rich period for every aspect British television, and this definitely had a positive impact on sci-fi. The viewers of the age were very open to new, imaginative ideas and welcomed the change of tone that the new BBC leadership would offer, as well as that created by other production companies. Many memorable series were given birth to in this age and they would be loved the world over. It could be said that the 1960s was a time for creativity, experimentation, openness and a belief in all possibilities, the like of which had never been witnessed before or in the years to follow.

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