Hybrid Time in The Living and the Dead
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Derek Johnston, Queen’s University Belfast – derek.johnston@qub.ac.uk

The ghost story typically presents an interaction of the past with the present, often in the form of ‘stone tape’ type repeats of an event from the past. The 2016 BBC series The Living and the Dead went beyond this to show the merging of multiple time streams, so people made choices in the ‘present’ because of influences from past and future, and past, present and future interacted, affecting each other. This breaking down of linear time breaks down concepts of rational cause and effect. Simultaneously it emphasises interconnectedness across time, the way that decisions made in the past influence the present, and the way that choices made in the present will influence the future. The series emphasises this temporal hybridity within its narrative, showing traditional life encountering modernisation and the modern finding the value of the traditional, but also making use of familiar imagery and narrative tropes from period dramas to remind the viewer of other texts. By collapsing time in this way, at a time of choices over the future of Britain in Europe, and over the future of the environment, this haunted pastorale interrogated the ways that decisions made now are tied up with our (mis)understanding of causes and consequences, and our fears of what went wrong in the past, and what may happen in the future.

In this paper, I consider the 2016 BBC series The Living and the Dead in relation to causality and our understanding of the flow of time. In particular, I want to argue that its disrupted temporalities are useful in helping us think about how contemporary issues are reflected in genre television. Most specifically, I want to argue that this haunted pastorale suggests some of the underlying concerns surrounding two specific issues: environmental concerns and Brexit.

The Living and the Dead is primarily set in 1894 on the Somerset farm estate of Shepzoy. Psychologist Nathan Appleby returns to the estate to visit his ailing mother and to play the traditional Appleby role of lighting the Solstice bonfire, bringing with him his second wife, Charlotte, herself a successful society photographer. Nathan’s mother dies, and Nathan and Charlotte decide to take on the estate rather than selling it, abandoning their modern metropolitan lives for a traditional role as leaders and guardians of a rural community. And it needs guarding, as it is facing economic troubles, and then a series of supernatural problems which Nathan has to confront.

So we can see themes already of guardianship of the land, of the modern and the traditional meeting and clashing, with the hope of limited technological progress bringing improvement. This is in many ways the standard stuff of the heritage drama, and the golden sunlit fields of the opening episodes could just as easily be part of Lark Rise to Candleford. Charlotte’s purchase of a steam engine to bring power to the farm is familiar from texts such as Tess of the Durbervilles, and the resistance to this machinery taking away from the skills and pride of the ploughman while also ensuring that the farm can simply survive is a familiar trope. Similarly, the prospects of a railway line connecting Shepzoy to the markets of London and even further afield is familiar from a range of texts, Cranford for one. Such texts speak to our dreams of a rural past, one of small communities where people work together for the common cause, where people
know their place but where each place is also valued. The bringing of technological advancement into these heritage communities is often seen as disruptive and troubling, a move away from the pastoral idyll with the intrusion of the outside world and the breaching of long-standing roles and identities, yet it can also be acknowledged as a way of preserving something of the local identity and tradition rather than having the population forced to scatter in order to survive.

But Shepzoy resists and rejects the future. These technological arrivals should have been more of the mid- than late-nineteenth century, already signalling that Shepzoy stands somewhat out of time.¹ A valve is smashed on the steam engine. The horrors that occur on the estate scare away the railway workers. And it is important to remember here that the railways signified the imposition of linear, standardised time onto communities. In order to meet the demands of the railways, even agricultural work had to move from natural time or local time to clock time, responding to a mechanically regulated temporality rather than the changes of the sun, the seasons, the weather, the crops and the animals themselves. The Living and the Dead does not explicitly emphasise this, but the importance of judging when the crop is ready for harvesting in its own time is key to one episode, as is the potential for tragedy in the face of the changing weather, which can ruin a freshly-gathered harvest.

The rejection of the future runs deeper. The ghost story is frequently seen as an irruption of the past into the present, but it is also quite often an intrusion of the future into the present. Think of the many traditional ghost stories which feature the presentiment of death, the traditions that on a certain night it is possible to see a procession of the souls of those who will die in the coming year. Think of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Think specifically of Nigel Kneale’s The Road.

The intrusion of the future into the present is key to The Living and the Dead. It is why I have the term ‘hybrid time’ in the title of this paper; it is not just a way to tie in to the conference theme. I claim that time is ‘hybrid’ in The Living and the Dead because of the way that causality is collapsed in on itself; because of the way that, in Emily Turner’s words, ‘[t]he internal clock of Shepzoy […] is slightly off kilter with that of the rest of the world’², and because of the ways that the conceptions of time as cycle or arrow are merged. I will clarify in a moment, but I want to suggest that this is actually in some ways closer to the way that we actually experience time and causality, but that it disrupts the models that we typically use to understand and model it. At the same time, this hybridity can help us to understand a number of cultural anxieties that we currently face.

¹ I am indebted to Emily Turner’s blog posts on The Living and the Dead at The Victorianist website for bringing this and other anachronisms into focus for me; see https://victorianist.wordpress.com/2017/01/06/neo-victorian-review-the-living-and-the-dead-you-will-reap-what-you-sow/ for her discussion of Shepzoy as a ‘multi-time space’.
Causality is typically considered to be linear: a thing happens causing something else to happen. I submit an abstract to a conference, and am either accepted or rejected; it doesn’t happen the other way around. However, that decision to submit that abstract to that conference was, or should have been, influenced by my understanding and imagining of future possibilities: will I have time to write the paper? will I have funds to attend the conference? will I have more fun at that conference than another one? will I make more useful contacts? will my research officer consider it valuable?

What *The Living and the Dead* does is dramatisate a situation where the future, apparently a definite future, directly influences the past. A clear but subtle example is present in the first episode of the series, and arguably sets in motion much of the tragedy that unfolds. As Nathan and Charlotte join in the solstice celebrations, they continue the traditional cycle of an Appleby always leading the ritual / party. Meanwhile, upstairs in the house Nathan’s ailing mother is disturbed, as we hear an unseen woman’s voice calling Nathan’s name, and the door to his mother’s room opens. The shock of what she sees as the door opens makes her heart give out, and she dies, her grip failing on the snow globe of Vienna that Nathan had given her as a souvenir of his attending a conference there, literally trapping that moment in time in an object. The snow globe encourages us to remember *Citizen Kane* (another engagement with time), and so encourages us to pay attention to it, and when we do we should notice that the light from the doorway that is reflected in the snow globe is a bright blue-white, a light not seen elsewhere in the nineteenth-century house.

Because this is a twenty-first century light. Nathan’s mother has seen her great-great-great-granddaughter, and that sight has killed her. Without her death, Nathan and Charlotte would not have decided to stay on at Shepsoy at that point, and at any later point they may have decided that the estate was past saving. Without the events that occur to them there, there would be no reason for the twenty-first century woman to return to the house in her time to try to learn more about Nathan. So the future can be understood to cause the past. And this intrusion of the future into the past is potentially the source of all of the supernatural troubles that are faced in the series.

In the final episode, the estate workers use the plough team to haul arotting carcass out from a marshy field. Gideon, the lead estate worker, expresses the hope that maybe now they’ve found and uncovered it, the horrors will stop. But this is not the body of some demon exposed from beneath the furrows, nor some standing stone lifted to expose the bones of an ancient sacrifice. These are the remains of a twenty-first century car.

As with the Martian space ship from *Quatermass and the Pit*, which causes outbreaks of psychic mob violence throughout London, this is a horror both ancient and of the future. Where the Martian ship indicated the additional horror of humans being not so special, but rather the result of genetic manipulation by technologically superior alien beings in the far distant past, the
car indicates the collapse of temporal certainty. This item from the future (which is our present) underlies the present (which is our past), and looks like it has been there for some time. And it has poisoned the land, literally as a source of pollution as it spills its fuel and lubricants into the ground, but also supernaturally. For if Shepzoy rejects the future, the presence of this alien body within the land can well be considered to be countered by an immune reaction, one which summons up the past to counteract the future. And so, if we take Lovelock’s Gaia-hypothesis as a useful metaphor to understand the environment, we can think of the global environment reacting as a living organism to the poisons that human activity is pumping into it, and responding to purge the infection.

I could talk for a long time about how this series engages us with ideas relating to time, how its casting and costuming as well as specific images serve to remind us of paintings and historical figures, particularly the very pre-Raphaelite Harriet who often seems to capture poses that suggest a Rossetti painting. Or how Nathan’s bearded, often hatted and haunted look seems reminiscent of D.H.Lawrence. And the change in Nathan’s costuming as the series progresses may have been primarily intended to signify his mental and emotional disintegration, but it also has the effect of making him appear more modern, as it becomes less formal. At his lowest point, he pulls on a sweater over what is essentially a long-sleeved T-shirt and adds a pea-coat, almost shifting time frame in his costume.

There are other elements presented throughout the series about time being non-linear, being hybridised in Shepzoy. You have probably not been wondering about the background to my slides, or may be thinking that it is simply a nice picture of a blue sky that relates to the rural aspect of the series, marred by an aircraft contrail. But it is a screen grab from the first episode of the show, and the contrail is not something that slipped through production, because we also hear the distant, familiar to us, sound of an airliner’s jet engines, and we see Nathan turn to the sound and notice the contrail and look at it in bafflement. And this while standing in a graveyard, by the graves of his mother and first wife, talking to a young woman who appears to be a medium through which the past speaks.

And I’ve not mentioned the standing stones. But then neither does anyone in the series, even though the labourers have to work around them.

It is such a rich text to think with, with so many potential avenues of approach.

But my time here is limited, so I will return to how the series can be useful in thinking about cultural context around environmental concerns and Brexit. I have already suggested how the series’ engagement with the pastorale can signify a desire to return to the past, along the lines suggested by Andrew Higson’s interpretation of the heritage drama. Which is not to say that I consider this series to be a depoliticised spectacle, rather that it uses our expectations of rural idylls to challenge us.
The return to the estate is a rejection of a modern, urban future which the Applebys could have had, both of them working at their careers in London. And the idea of return connects the Applebys back to the conception of cyclical time, of time that is organised by the natural turn from day to night, from summer to autumn to winter to spring to summer. They are connected to the cyclical rituals of the solstice festival, and the marking of All Hallow’s Eve, returning to the past, but the return to the past is as poisonous as the presence of the car beneath the ground. It feeds Nathan’s obsession with his dead son by his first wife, and his desire to reverse time’s arrow, to go back to when he was happy before rather than living in a time when he is happy now and could be happy in the future.

To me, there is a sense here which is familiar from thinking about environmental anxieties and Brexit. In both cases, these anxieties can be seen as people thinking ‘if I want to get to a better future, I wouldn’t start here’. There is a temptation with both to imagine, and even try to recreate, a better past which would avoid the problems of the future. With the environment, many people are aware that we needed to change our industrialising, global-travelling, disposable lifestyles a long time ago in order to avoid the environmental damage that we are now facing in the hottest summer on record, and that will only get worse. With Brexit, there is a rejection of the 1975 Conservative government’s referendum on whether the UK should remain in the European Communities, and the earlier decision to join the EC in 1973.

Like many ghost stories, The Living and the Dead shows people dealing with the sins of the past, and having to reinterpret the past. But it also shows people who cannot move on from the past: Nathan cannot face his present problems if it means letting go of his obsession with his dead son. Similarly, the ghosts in The Living and the Dead are significant because they do not just repeat the past, but they continue to act in the present. The past is not just in the past, but is an active participant in the present. And that inability to let go of the past is shown to lead to breakdown and madness. This is very much like the damaging ‘restorative nostalgia’ theorised by Svetlana Boym, which ‘knows two main plots - the return to origins and the conspiracy.’ The return to origins can be seen in Nathan’s return to the seemingly idyllic, but failing and poisoned, ancestral home, as it can be seen in Brexit dreams of a return to the golden-lit, white-only populated, pastures of a powerful and independent Old England, or the pastoralist environmental dreams of a return to a simpler way of life more in touch with the rhythms of nature. The return to origins is ‘taking back control’; the conspiracy is all too familiar from cries of those who see people raising objections to the way that Brexit is being handled as traitors and enemies.

So we can see in The Living and the Dead something of our own times, and our struggles with time. The desire to escape to the past is confounded by the realisation that the past was not as golden as it is often represented. And it is poisoned by the future, represented by that petrol-

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guzzling beast buried beneath the field. So as we make our decisions now, we have to avoid being scared by the ghosts of the past and the future, and instead seek to understand what they mean in terms of causes and possibilities and respond to them accordingly. If we do not, like Nathan Appleby, we run the risk of losing ourselves.

Thank you.