Repositioning The Quatermass Experiment: Predecessors, Comparisons and Origin Narratives
Derek Johnston, Queen's University, Belfast
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While the situation has improved over the past few years, it used to be that the history of British television science fiction began simply in 1953 with The Quatermass Experiment. Even today, popular histories of the genre will tend to valorise the serial and its writer, Nigel Kneale, while ignoring earlier examples of the genre. Don't get me wrong: I think that The Quatermass Experiment is an interesting, effective and significant piece of television science fiction, and that Nigel Kneale deserves to be celebrated for his work, as well as explored academically.

But The Quatermass Experiment was not the first piece of British television science fiction. Nor was it the first piece of British television science fiction written by Nigel Kneale. It was not even the first British television science fiction serial. It was not even the first British television science fiction serial to have a sequel. And I believe that we need to consider the forgotten earlier history of the genre, and that discussing the reasons why this history might be forgotten can help us in understanding why certain parts of our television history become celebrated, and how that narrative becomes dominant.

Let us start, then, with a brief corrective, and an outline of the history of British television science fiction, working backwards from The Quatermass Experiment [SLIDE]. As you can see, there wasn't a lot of it, but it did have a history, and that history incorporated adaptations, original stories, adult and child audiences, different tones and moods, single plays and serials. And this does not take into account the radio science fiction which was also being produced.

One thing to note immediately from this is that most of the science fiction here is aimed at an adult audience. In fact, the one example that is not is Stranger from Space, the first British television science fiction serial and a case study that I will be returning to. Also, while No Smoking! presented an intentionally comedic text, the overall tone of these science fiction texts is serious. They are being used to consider the effects of technological and social change, whether Čapek's and Wells’ concerns with the dehumanisation of labour, or Priestley’s about Britain's place in the post-War world, or Holtby and Gunsbury’s with the dangers of sliding into totalitarian government for all the best intentions. These are not action-adventure productions aimed at children or teenagers, nor light fantasies, apart from No Smoking!, and even that is about the international social and economic effects of the invention of a pill that stops people smoking.

You may think that this is different for Stranger from Space, as that was aimed at a child audience, and was broadcast in ten-minute episodes, which reduce the time available for involving protracted considerations of issues. Not only that, [SLIDE] but it was integrated into a magazine programme aimed at younger children and presented with a slapstick-centred frame involving a puppet character called 'Mr Turnip'. You can see here a listing for one of the episodes containing Stranger from Space, which illustrates the sort of material that surrounded the serial. However, Stranger from Space presents a consistent tone of mistrust of authority, and is tied up with Cold War concerns about British
technological power, and the penetration of military, political and technological structures by outside forces, be they from other nations or other planets. And I now want to focus briefly on *Stranger from Space* to return to those central questions about why certain productions are remembered and others are not.

*Stranger from Space's* first series focuses on a teenager, Ian, who finds a crashed Martian spaceship which has been scouting Earth to gather intelligence. Please note that this represents the first appearance of an extraterrestrial in British science fiction television. The Martian pilot, Bilaphodorous, known as Bill, becomes Ian's friend, and they set off to help Bill return home. This involves evading the authorities who are out looking for the two youths, who offer a reward for identifying them, essentially putting a price on their heads. Reaching the atomic rocket project of Professor Bernard Watkins (yes, I'll come back to that), they draw on the technology of Bill's ship to return Bill to Mars, just in time to learn that the Martian leader is planning the invasion of Earth.

Series two deals with the fight back against the Martian leader. Mars is under threat from a rogue planet, and the Martians want to settle on Earth, but some want to do so peacefully, developing uninhabited areas, while others just want to take over the planet. The hero role switches from Ian to John, the heroic engineer/pilot who had flown Bill back to Mars, but also involves a feisty female radio specialist, Pam Vernon. This switch to an older lead role is interesting, as it suggests that those responsible for the serial considered this second series to have an older audience than that imagined for the first one. A Martian revolution, aided by John and Pam, sees the end of the evil Martian leader Gorgol, played by Valentine Dyall, and his forces sent off on the rogue planet that was threatening to destroy Mars.

There are a number of key reasons as to why this programme is no longer remembered, or at least not significantly. There is a website devoted to *Whirligig* as a whole, although with little mention of *Stranger from Space*. The first reason for forgetting the serial is a reason that is familiar to anyone examining early broadcasting: it was broadcast live and, while it did involve some brief use of telecine inserts, it was not recorded, nor were the performances repeated later in the week, as was typical with adult dramas. This meant that the only way to revisit the narrative was through the 1953 illustrated novelisation, [SLIDE] and the fact that there was a novelisation suggests that the serial did have some success at the time, although it in no way matches the amount of merchandise associated with the rest of *Whirligig*. Indeed, Mr Turnip was not only used on a range of merchandise, but also had a cartoon strip occupying the centre pages of *Mickey Mouse Weekly*.

While *Stranger from Space* had the sole live performance and the novelisation, *The Quatermass Experiment*, on the other hand, had its repeat performance of each episode, [SLIDE] the 1955 film version from Hammer and [SLIDE] the 1959 Penguin publication of the scripts with stills from the production. Then, of course, *The Quatermass Experiment* had television sequels which were also reproduced in print and adapted for film, keeping the character in the public eye throughout the second half of the 1950s and beyond through regular revisitations.

This period is important because it represents the time of the rapid growth of television. In 1951 the television service was limited to the areas around London and Birmingham, with only 8.7% of UK

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homes having a television set. By the end of 1953, this had gone up to 21.8%\(^1\) as more transmitters were built and television viewing expanded geographically. So fewer people would have had a chance to see Stranger from Space than could have seen The Quatermass Experiment, a geographical issue compounded by the absence of repeats. Then there was the scheduling: Stranger from Space was not only a 5:30pm programme for children, it was only a ten-minute slot within a magazine programme, most of which was aimed at younger children than the serial adventures that it carried.

This not only reduced the potential audience, but it has had a knock-on effect. As Maire Messenger Davies has noted, children’s television drama is often left out of academic discussion of the medium,\(^2\) even though it is often the subject of non-academic nostalgic histories and chat. Then, as Jason Jacobs has emphasised and a number of people have expanded upon, while there has been academic work like Jacobs’ on analysing the ghost texts of television through their surviving production documentation, the process of canonisation of television texts depends upon their availability to view. This issue is enhanced where popular histories of television are concerned, particularly those on television, such as Dominic Sandbrook’s Tomorrow’s Worlds: The Unearthly History of Science Fiction, where there is a desire, even a demand that the history be accompanied by illustrative images and clips.

Further issues with canonisation can arise from the way that texts rely on each other, and Stranger from Space provides a useful example of this. [SLIDE] Roger Fulton’s Encyclopedia of TV Science Fiction claimed in 1990 that viewers were ‘encouraged to write in with their suggestions for what should happen next’.\(^3\) Luke Hockley’s entry on ‘Science Fiction’ in The Television Genre Book, first published in 2001, [SLIDE] also claims that ‘viewers were asked to write in with suggestions about how the story might develop’.\(^4\) But this is simply not true; all episodes of Stranger from Space were scripted by Adair and Marriott and the script for the surrounding material includes no mention of audience members sending in their suggestions. However, other serials that ran in the same slot as Stranger from Space were written by audience members responding to an initial setup and a prompt from the producers as to what was wanted in the next episode. These were part of a long sequence of programmes, now forgotten, on radio and television, BBC and ITV, devised and produced by the splendidly-named Frank Coven where the audience wrote all of the episodes apart from the first. So this is an example of how a mistake, probably down to simple confusion, can become repeated and so a part of the history, although I am pleased to say that this particular error seems to be being forgotten in more recent mentions of the serial.

One potential disadvantage that Stranger From Space had in terms of being remembered may relate also to it being the product of a female author, [SLIDE] Hazel Adair, although she was writing with her husband, Ronald Marriott. Adair would later go on to co-create the successful series Compact and

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Crossroads, for which she is recognised. Of course, both programmes had a bigger audience than Stranger from Space, and were aimed at adults, and took up a larger part of Adair's career. But they also fit into the soap opera genre, which has frequently been considered as feminine territory, and it is notable that her male co-writer on both, Peter Ling, is arguably less well-remembered than she is for his contributions. The 'masculine' genre of science fiction, however, even when aimed at children, another area considered to be of particular feminine interest, needed a masculine origin figure.

This figure was provided by Nigel Kneale. [SLIDE] As already mentioned, Kneale’s Quatermass serials had the advantages of larger potential audiences than Stranger from Space, which likely translated into larger actual audiences, as well as being aimed at adults and so considered more 'serious', and ongoing accessibility in other forms as well as the sequel series to help keep the character in the public’s memories. In the figure of Kneale himself it also found a willing publicist, although one who cannily and correctly also emphasised the role of producer and collaborator Rudolph Cartier [SLIDE] in the success of their science fiction work. The notoriety gained through their version of Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four also helped to cement them in the national consciousness as the people who did science fiction horror. Indeed, the obituary for Cartier in The Times concentrates on The Quatermass Experiment and Nineteen Eighty-Four, even though Cartier died forty years after the adaptation was broadcast.

But The Quatermass Experiment was not Kneale’s first science fiction for the BBC. As noted earlier, he had previously adapted two other plays with science fiction content: Mystery Story and Number Three.

[SLIDE] Mystery Story begins with the discovery of a mathematician’s horribly burned body, his surroundings and even his clothes mysteriously unharmed. This is revealed to be the work of a being from the future inhabiting the body of the mathematician’s wife, who discovered that he was working on theories that would lead humans to knowledge that they could not handle. So she decided to use her psychic powers to hurt him in order to dissuade him from the research, but unfortunately chose to do so on the night of a big football game in the stadium next to the observatory. The emotion from the supporters acted as a psychic lens and enhanced her power to the extent that the mathematician combusted.

[SLIDE] Number Three presented a British nuclear research establishment and the conflicts between its staff over the possibility of their research being used to develop weapons. One scientist is so overtaken by their moral qualms that they intentionally turn the experimental reactor into a bomb in order to destroy the lab and irradiate the nearby village as a horrible warning. This brings to mind the conflict between the research scientist with a conscience and the military that can be found in the Quatermass serials, and also in Stranger from Space. Of course, in both the Quatermass serials and in Stranger from Space, that character is a Professor called Bernard in charge of a British rocket project. Similarly, the psychic powers of the mob in Mystery Story bring to mind Quatermass and the Pit, and the power reaching across time occurs in Quatermass and the Pit, Quatermass and The Stone Tape. Possession by an alien intelligence appears in Mystery Story, but also in The Quatermass Experiment, Quatermass II, and Quatermass and the Pit.
None of which is meant to say that Kneale directly lifted any of these elements from any of these sources. The ideas are certainly not unique to these texts; indeed Stranger from Space also involves aliens with psychic powers. However, these connections do demonstrate that Kneale was working in an existing context, one which contained certain ideas which Kneale himself would develop and engage with in his own work, and most effectively.

And that brings me to my concluding point, which is to consider some of my reasons for exploring these forgotten texts. They help to make the contexts in which our canonical histories sit that much clearer. They provide us with correctives to received ideas, and raise new questions. This does not mean that we need to stop celebrating our heroes or enjoying their work; indeed, for me it actually enhances their work to see it in its full context rather than seemingly springing full-formed from nowhere. But it means that we can celebrate these people and programmes for what they actually are, rather than what they are imagined to be.

In the case of Nigel Kneale and The Quatermass Experiment, this actually places them at the start of what I consider to be a third phase of television science fiction development. [SLIDE] These phases also fit neatly with Jason Jacobs' interpretation of the early development of television style. In the first phase, [SLIDE] science fiction presented an opportunity to experiment with television style and the possibilities of the medium. In the second phase, [SLIDE] as the audience expanded and producers and technical staff developed a stronger sense of what worked in television, a conservatism about style developed, although the themes being dealt with within the programmes were still serious and well-intentioned, and Kneale was involved in this phase as an adapter of other people's work. But this is where the third phase begins, [SLIDE] with the genre once more becoming involved with experimenting with televisual form, expanding the spatial and temporal possibilities of the medium and not being so afraid of potentially disturbing an imagined middlebrow audience. This is what I believe Kneale and The Quatermass Experiment should be remembered and celebrated for: a revival of the possibilities of the genre, not an inaccurate tale of origin.

Thank you.