‘Went the Day of the Daleks well?’ An investigation into the role of invasion narratives in shaping 1950s and 1960s British television Science Fiction, as shown in Quatermass, Doctor Who and UFO

If the function of art is to hold a mirror up to society, then science fiction (sf), through the distorted reflection it offers, allows the examination of aspects of society that might otherwise be too uncomfortable to confront.

This essay aims to look at how invasion narratives, stories concerned with the invasion of Britain from outside, shaped three British science fiction series, and how those series interrogated the narratives. The series will primarily be examined through aesthetic and social approaches. Particular areas to be explored include the embracing and subverting of common assumptions about Britain’s attitude to invasion, and the differing attitudes to the military displayed.

Introduction

As an island nation, the prospect of invasion has always occupied a prominent place in the British popular imagination. According to Sellar and Yeatman, the two memorable dates in history are 55 BC and 1066, the dates of the invasions of Julius Caesar and William the Conqueror.\(^1\) Subsequent events such as the Spanish Armada of 1588 are also well-known moments in history.

It is inevitable that the prospect of invasion should produce speculative literature. Some works appeared around the time of Napoleon’s threatened invasion of 1803,\(^2\) but ‘invasion literature’ as a literary genre emerged out of the growing market for novels and short-story magazines, and is generally considered to have begun with the appearance of George Tompkyns Chesney’s 1871 story ‘The Battle of Dorking’,\(^3\) a story of the German conquest of England, prompted by the German victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. Such counterfactual future speculations could be considered to be science fiction stories in their own right. But the most famous science fictional invasion stories are those which deal with alien invasions. The first of these was H.G. Wells’ 1898 novel The War of the Worlds, which translated much of the material of ‘The Battle of Dorking’ (Wells begins his Martian invasion in the same part of Surrey) into a form in which the invaders, instead of Germans, were Martians.

War of the Worlds establishes many of the features of the British sf invasion story, though it does not contain all of them. The invasion takes place in Britain, usually south-east England. The aliens are usually massively technologically superior, and overrun the defences. There is a significant role played by the British military, who are presented as (in general) brave and professional, if often lacking the imagination to fight the aliens successfully. Defeat of the invasion comes about through unconventional means, often promoted by a scien-

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1 Sellar and Yeatman, pp.1, 17.
3 Clarke, ‘Future war stories’.
tist figure who exists somewhat outside the establishment.\textsuperscript{4} Sometimes (though not in \textit{War of the Worlds}) the invasion involves, at least in its initial stages, infiltration. One of the most important features is the juxtaposition of the strange with the familiar; in the case of \textit{War of the Worlds}, the Martian war machines destroying familiar suburbs of London such as Woking and Weybridge. This is meant to unsettle the reader, and make them feel uncomfortable, in a way that they find thrilling, and causes them to come back to similar stories.

Chapman writes (in reference to the use of the motif in \textit{Doctor Who}):\textsuperscript{5}

\begin{quote}

The invasion narrative reflects a contradictory sense of national awareness. On the one hand, it expresses a sense of paranoia and insecurity: the nation is vulnerable to alien (for which read foreign) invasion and proves unable to resist a technologically superior force until it is saved by the advanced scientific knowledge of the Doctor. On the other hand, it also suggests a perverse sense of national self-importance and prestige: as long as alien invaders deem it necessary to take over the British Isles as a prelude to their conquest of the Earth, the illusion of Britain as a great power is maintained.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

Invasion literature was, of course, given a major boost by the events of the Second World War. From the Fall of France in June 1940 through to D-Day four years later, the population of Britain were constantly aware of the possibility of German invasion.\textsuperscript{6} The threat of invasion to the British way of life was central to the film \textit{Went the Day Well?}, in which German infiltrators pretended to be British troops and occupied an English village.\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Went the Day Well?} is not itself science fiction, but it shares many resonances with sf in portrayal of English country life as strange and alien.\textsuperscript{8} It does not seem too fanciful to suggest that this film influenced the next wave of sf invasion narratives.

The chief exponent of this was John Wyndham. Three of his novels in particular are worth noting. In \textit{The Day of the Triffids} Britain is overwhelmed by intelligent killer plants. In \textit{The Midwich Cuckoos} alien children infiltrate an English village. In \textit{The Kraken Wakes}, aliens establish themselves in the ocean depths, and then attack humanity; this last novel broadens its horizons, describing a world-wide assault, but it is told through the eyes of an English journalist.

\textbf{The Quatermass serials (1953-1959)}

The \textit{Quatermass} serials, written by Nigel Kneale, are recognized as important moments in the history of television science fiction, and indeed of British television overall.\textsuperscript{9} The Quater-

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\textsuperscript{4} Such a figure in absent from \textit{The War of the Worlds}, though Wells had already provided the prototype in \textit{The Time Machine}.  
\textsuperscript{5} Chapman, \textit{Inside the TARDIS}, p.5.  
\textsuperscript{6} In practical terms, this threat was never very real; the Royal Navy was never reduced to a sufficient degree to make invasion feasible. But for this argument all that matters is that the threat was believe to be real.  
\textsuperscript{7} The basic idea was revived for Jack Higgins novel \textit{The Eagle Has Landed} and the subsequent film.  
\textsuperscript{8} McGrath identifies the film as science fictional.  
mass Experiment was the first original (rather than adapted) adult science fiction series on British television. It was preceded by single-play adaptations of Karel Capek’s RUR and Wells’ The Time Machine, and the children’s series Stranger from Space, but none of these constituted invasion narratives. From its opening sequence The Quatermass Experiment conjured up resonances of the Second World War. The theme music chosen was Gustav Holst’s ‘Mars, bringer of war’, and the first shot, ostensibly of Professor Quatermass’ space-rocket, is actually of a V-2, the missile used by the Germans to attack London in 1944 and 1945.

The Quatermass Experiment appeared at a time when perceptions of Britain’s role in the world were shifting. The empire was shrinking; India had become independent in 1947, Burma and Ceylon the following year (when the British also withdrew from Palestine). But it was still credible in the popular imagination that Britain was a world power, and so might be at the forefront of space exploration.

The Quatermass Experiment tells the story of three astronauts who encounter alien life on their mission. On their return, they are absorbed into a single alien plant with the potential to destroy life on Earth. It is not quite a full British invasion narrative – the plant is not deliberately trying to take over the earth through conquering the UK. However, many of the features are displayed, such as the involvement of the army in fighting the menace, and the unconventional means used to destroy it (Quatermass appeals to the consciousnesses of the three astronauts within the creature). Quatermass II, two years later, was a more conventional invasion/infiltration narrative; aliens are infiltrating the British government, and have their prime invasion base in the south-east of England (though it is conceded that there are other bases across the world that will be activated later). The military presence, however, is toned down.

By the time the final serial, Quatermass and the Pit, was broadcast in 1958-59, Britain’s delusions of world importance had been shattered by the Suez crisis. The serial has a less cosy relationship with the military and authority than the previous two. Quatermass is replaced as commander of the British Experimental Rocket Group by the narrow-minded Colonel Breen. The story has a variation on the invasion narrative. The invasion has in fact taken place millions of years before, when Martians landed and genetically modified certain members of humanity. But there is still a threat to be resisted – there is a danger that those humans with strong alien genes will wipe out those in whom the genes are weak. This climax of the serial seems influenced by the Notting Hill race riots of August and September 1958 (the series went into production in November). But resonances of the Second World War still remain; some footage of London burning due to Martian-inspired riots is in fact footage of the city after German bombing.

Kneale took many of the concerns of Wyndham and other contemporary sf writers, and transferred them to the television screen. Because he was not doing anything particularly

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11 Marwick, p.186.
12 Though see Hutchings, p.36.
13 Marwick, pp.210-11.
radical in terms of the genre overall, some have been dismissive of Kneale’s work.\textsuperscript{14} But in terms of television science fiction, the \textit{Quatermass} serials are extremely influential. In establishing the Wells-derived character of the unconventional scientist as hero, \textit{Quatermass} influenced the most important science fiction series ever made in Britain.

\textbf{Doctor Who (1963-1989)}

\textit{Doctor Who} is unquestionably the most important and successful British science fiction series ever made, and any consideration of the British sf series cannot ignore it. Moreover, as well as being, as Tulloch and Alvarado put it, an ‘unfolding text’,\textsuperscript{15} it is a very varied and often self-contradictory text. Any attempt to identify themes in the show must be qualified with the observation that these themes can only be identified in some stories, and not necessarily in all.

Chapman notes that the series employs the invasion narrative more frequently than any other template.\textsuperscript{16} Elsewhere, he draws attention to the way in which the 1964 story \textit{The Dalek Invasion of Earth} allegorizes the Blitz and the Second World War.\textsuperscript{17} Plenty of evidence can be adduced for this; the devastation of London depicted would be familiar to anyone growing up in the city in the 1950s, and the \textit{mise-en-scène} of these scenes owes much to another allegory of war-damaged London, the BBC adaptation of \textit{1984}, made by the same writer-director team as the \textit{Quatermass} serials.\textsuperscript{18} The iconic scenes of Daleks by London landmarks, such as crossing Westminster Bridge, might, as Chapman says, have reminded some viewers of scenes of German stormtroopers marching down Whitehall in the counterfactual pseudo-documentary \textit{It Happened Here}, first shown at the London Film Festival the same month, November 1964, as \textit{The Dalek Invasion of Earth} was first broadcast.\textsuperscript{19}

What Chapman does not make clear in ‘The science fiction series’ is how untypical of early \textit{Doctor Who} this story is. Though the central figure of the scientist owes something to \textit{Quatermass}, in many other respects \textit{Doctor Who} seems to have been deliberately avoiding repeating the \textit{Quatermass} formula. Though \textit{Quatermass} seems not to have been explicitly mentioned as something to avoid,\textsuperscript{20} the idea of having the main characters being a team of scientific trouble-shooters, something close to the way Quatermass and the Experimental Rocket Group were used in \textit{Quatermass and the Pit}, was dismissed as being ‘corny’.\textsuperscript{21} In some ways, a clearer influence on early \textit{Doctor Who} seems to be the anthology series \textit{Out of this World}, produced by ABC, one of the ITV companies, when Sydney Newman was Head of Drama there. An argument can be made that \textit{Doctor Who} borrowed the anthology format

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{14}So Brian Aldiss, elder statesman of British science fiction, did not consider Kneale an important writer in the history of sf, when asked to comment on a BBC radio obituary of the latter.
\bibitem{15}Tulloch and Alvarado.
\bibitem{16}Chapman, \textit{Inside the TARDIS}, p.5.
\bibitem{17}Chapman, ‘The science fiction series’, pp.175-6.
\bibitem{18}This is more obvious in the movie version, \textit{Daleks – Invasion Earth}.
\bibitem{19}Chapman, \textit{Inside the TARDIS}, p.43.
\bibitem{20}At least as far as can be deduced from the documents quoted in Cull, pp.230-2, and Chapman, \textit{Inside the TARDIS}, pp.15-22.
\bibitem{21}Cull, p.243, n.12.
\end{thebibliography}
of *Out of this World*, and added to it a small continuous cast, correcting what was seen as one of the weaknesses of *Out of this World*.\(^{22}\)

Though the show largely avoided the invasion narrative in its early years, nevertheless, a show with a format as flexible as that of *Doctor Who* could always accommodate such narratives. *The Dalek Invasion of Earth* is the first. The next one was not broadcast until eighteen months later. *The War Machines* was the fourth serial produced by third *Who* producer Innes Lloyd, and one of the first in which he and new script-editor Gerry Davis were able to establish their own direction for the series.\(^{23}\) It was also the first *Doctor Who* story to have a contemporary, or near-contemporary setting.

*The War Machines* is a classic Wellsian invasion narrative, except that the menace, rather than alien, is a super-computer (a type of threat that would recur). Other than this, the story features most of the common motifs. The Doctor works with the army and authorities, against a menace that can put technologically superior and almost invulnerable War Machines in the streets of London. The super-computer WOTAN plans to begin its conquest of the planet with London, and only subsequently will attempt to take over other cities such as Washington. In the end it is the Doctor’s scientific knowledge, not brute force, that defeats the menace.

Lloyd’s *Doctor Who* went on to be typified by what Chapman describes as ‘intrusion narratives’.\(^{24}\) Specifically, many of the stories involved an isolated base or settlement that was then infiltrated by alien menaces, a motif that owes much to the 1951 movie *The Thing from Another World*. These settings included an Antarctic base run by the US military (*The Tenth Planet*), a human colony on a distant planet (*Power of the Daleks*) and a Tibetan monastery (*The Abominable Snowmen*).

A Wellsian invasion narrative set in Britain did not appear again until *The Web of Fear* in early 1968. This story, in which alien robots invade the London Underground, featured exactly the sort of juxtaposition of the ordinary and the alien that features in many invasion narratives, and once again the Doctor is working with the army. *The Web of Fear* was perceived as a success with audiences, and influenced decisions made about the show’s format by the new producer/script editor team of Peter Bryant and Derrick Sherwin. Sherwin felt that the show had lost its way, and was losing viewers.\(^{25}\) After viewing some episodes of *Quater-“Invasion narratives in British television Science Fiction”

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\(^{22}\) See Chapman, *Inside the TARDIS*, p.16, for the perceived need to add Boris Karloff as host to strengthen *Out of this World*. The series was later, to all intents and purposes, revived on the BBC as *Out of the Unknown*.

\(^{23}\) Howe and Walker, p.96. Verity Lambert had produced the show from November 1963 to October 1965. She then handed over to John Wiles, but the second serial he had to oversee was the twelve-part *Daleks’ Master Plan*, commissioned by Lambert, and he left the show after only five months.

\(^{24}\) Chapman, *Inside the TARDIS*, p.66.

\(^{25}\) Howe, Stammers and Walker, p.6. There is some indication that the real dropping off of viewers came not with the fifth season, mid-way through which Bryant and Sherwin took over, but with the sixth, after all the planned changes for the future had been finalized (Chapman, *Inside the TARDIS*, pp.72-3). The fifth season is also generally now considered to be one of the show’s best (Howe and Walker, p.129).
Invasion narratives in British television Science Fiction

mass, Bryant and Sherwin decided that what was needed was a move to the Quatermass formula, in which stories took place in an environment that the audience could recognise and identify with. The Doctor would be working with a special branch of the military trained to deal with alien invasion, named the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce (UNIT). By creating an international organisation, the producers hoped to replicate the success of similar secret organizations in other shows, such as The Man from U.N.C.L.E. (though it was only British members of UNIT who ever got involved in fighting off alien attacks).

The show’s new format was piloted with The Invasion, which reintroduced the character of Colonel (alter Brigadier) Alastair Lethbridge-Stewart (played by Nicholas Courtney) from The Web of Fear as UNIT’s commanding officer. This story saw the Cybermen attack Earth, and iconic shots of Cybermen walking down the steps from St Paul’s Cathedral to the River Thames recalled similar shots of the Daleks at London landmarks. The permanent change came with Spearhead from Space in 1970. This saw a number of other significant changes for the show. Most obviously the cast entirely changed; regulars Patrick Troughton (the Doctor), Fraser Hines (Jamie) and Wendy Padbury (Zoe) had all decided to leave in 1969, to be replaced by Jon Pertwee as the Doctor, Carline John as assistant Liz Shaw, and Courtney. The show was also now in colour, and reduced to being on only for six months, rather than all the year round as had been the case.

Spearhead from Space showed the Quatermass influence in 1970s Doctor Who most obviously. In fact, much of it reworks Quatermass II: both stories open in a military radar centre with observation of unusual meteorites, and involve the collection of the contents of the meteorites and transferring them to a factory, from where the plot to take over the planet is being controlled. In the 1970 and 1971 seasons, every story bar one was set on contemporary Earth. The influence of Quatermass was evident throughout these stories. There are clear similarities between The Quatermass Experiment and Ambassadors of Death, both of which feature British astronauts who encounter aliens on their missions and return changed.

Though the Doctor’s relationship with the Brigadier was usually cordial, sometimes there was tension arising out of their different priorities, similar to that between Colonel Breen and Quatermass in Quatermass and the Pit. This was most obviously seen in The Silurians, where the Brigadier blew up the eponymous humanoid reptiles, an act the Doctor considered murder.

This period saw a restoration in the show’s popularity. Part of this will have been due to the factors Bryant and Sherwin had identified, making the settings of the stories more realistic. Another factor will have been Jon Pertwee’s charismatic performance. Pertwee was the most ‘British’ of the Doctors so far, and his characterisation drew on the same appeal of the post-imperial hero that had made both James Bond and John Steed successful.

But one might postulate another reason why the invasion narratives were particular popular. This was also the period of Dad’s Army, another successful show about Britain under threat of invasion. Part of this will have been that the threat of invasion retained resonance

26 Chapman, Inside the TARDIS, p.83, calls it an ‘homage’.
27 Chapman, Inside the TARDIS, p.78.
28 See the figures discussed in Howe, Stammers and Walker, pp.30, 42.
for audiences thirty years later. But part of it was also that a new European power block was forming, in the form of the European Economic Community. Public opinion on this matter was divided (the Labour Party expressed its opposition in 1972).\(^2^9\) Both *Doctor Who* and *Dad’s Army* could connect with hostility to Europe. Both also, in their own ways, questioned the narrative, *Dad’s Army* through placing the defence of the nation in the hands of a group of bumbling, if brave, old men, and *Doctor Who* through often allowing that the aliens might have a point of view, and simple extermination of them might not be the morally correct thing to do, even where it was expedient (this is the argument at the end of *The Silurians*).

The move to Earthbound stories was not universally approved of by the pool of writers. Malcolm Hulke commented that it meant that there were only two types of stories that could be told – alien invasions and mad scientists.\(^3^0\) When Bryant and Sherwin moved on in 1970 to be replaced by Barry Letts and Terrance Dicks, the new team felt that a return to travels in time was needed. In 1971, they had their first story in which the Doctor travelled to an alien planet (*Colony in Space*). From the 1972 season, they radically changed the series’ format. Where almost every story in 1970 and 1971 had been an Earthbound UNIT adventure, in the 1972 season, of five stories, only three followed this pattern. Even then, major variations were introduced. In two of the stories, *Day of the Daleks* and *The Time Monster*, large parts of the action took place in other time zones (and in the latter, the story was resolved there). The only wholly Earthbound story was *The Sea Devils*, which actually dispensed with most of the UNIT personnel. Subsequent seasons followed a similar pattern, until UNIT was finally phased out in 1976, early in the period of the next Doctor, Tom Baker.

Nevertheless, the show would return to contemporary-set adventures, and invasion narratives would recur from time to time. In the meantime, the popularity of the UNIT years influenced other British science fiction series, such as *Doomwatch* (1970-1972) and *The Tomorrow People* (1973-1979), both of which had parochial British aspects, though they take different approaches.

**UFO (1970-1971)**

*UFO* provides an interesting contrast to *Doctor Who*. This was another series made in Britain, at the same time as *Doctor Who* was moving to the Earthbound setting of the UNIT stories. However, unlike *Doctor Who*, it was aimed at an American market, since it was made for Lew Grade’s ITC company. The creators, Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, had had previously produced successful science fiction series for children, using puppets. Most of these were international in their settings; *Thunderbirds* was about an American family who operated a secret worldwide rescue agency, whilst *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* was about an international organization defending earth from another Martian threat.

*UFO* was the Andersons’ first live-action series for adults. The show was an invasion narrative, dealing with the attacks on Earth made by an unnamed race of aliens, in craft that gave the series its name. But, because of its intended market, *UFO* had a more international, less parochially British approach than *Quatermass* and *Doctor Who*. The success of James

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\(^{2^9}\) Marwick, p.280.

\(^{3^0}\) Howe, Stammers and Walker, p.23.
Bond and Simon Templar had shown that British heroes could be successful with an American audience, but only by moving these characters into an international context. American audiences would be unlikely to want to see an invasion where the primary threat was to the south-east of England. To internationalize the show, Gerry Anderson cast an American (albeit one living in the UK), Ed Bishop, in the lead role of Ed Straker, head of SHADO, the organization defending the Earth. *UFO* fell back on what was a standard ITC ploy, of filming in England, but then, through the use of stock footage, interior sets or, in the case of *UFO*, model shots, presenting the action as taking place elsewhere in the world. So, in ‘Computer Affair’, model shots and backdrops of snow-covered mountains are used to establish that a confrontation with a UFO takes place in Canada. Other episodes were primarily set on the Moon.

Nevertheless, the economic realities of where the series was made did affect the settings of episodes. It was generally cheaper to have a forest in Surrey represent a forest in Surrey than pretend it was a forest in Canada. So, the headquarters of SHADO were locate in London, and many episodes, such as ‘The Sound of Silence’ or ‘E.S.P.’, took place in the south-east of England.

*UFO* also had a different view of the military to that seen in *Quatermass* and *Doctor Who*. In those series, the lead character co-operated with the military, but stood slightly aside from it. In *UFO* all the chief characters belonged to the military. The series did not have the same clash between the unmilitary scientist and the army way of doing things – indeed, there was no regular scientist character. There was sometimes a clash between the ruthlessness of Straker and his deputy Alec Freeman, motivated by more humane instincts. But, in contrast to what would be expected in *Quatermass* or *Doctor Who*, it was usually Straker who was proved right, who showed himself able to take the necessary action to safeguard Earth. In this case, expediency usually overruled morality, as demonstrated in ‘The Square triangle’, where SHADO stumble into a domestic murder plot. To protect their own security, SHADO allow the murder to take place.

*UFO* was not a successful series. It was never taken seriously as an adult show, and was scattered around various ITV regional schedules.

**Conclusion**

The 1970s saw the height of the invasion narrative on British television. Since then, it has continued to appear, in a new *Quatermass* serial, an adaptation of *Day of the Triffids*, *Invasion: Earth*, and most recently, episodes of *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood*. But it is no longer quite the dominant mode in British science fiction that it was in the 1950s and 1970s. This possibly represents a nation less concerned about their place as a world power. Moreover, whilst their remain many in Britain still very alarmed at the perceived threat from Europe, this has become seen as a right-wing view, and something that the more liberally-minded people working in television may not wish to associate with.

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31 So, both films of *War of the Worlds* have relocated the action to the United States; Chapman, *Inside the TARDIS*, pp.5-6.
Nevertheless, with the BBC having filmed a new version of *Day of the Triffids* for broadcast later in 2009, the Wellsian British invasion narrative will be with us for some time yet.
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Tony Keen

‘Invasion narratives in British television Science Fiction’


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Tony Keen

‘Invasion narratives in British television Science Fiction’

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