
Hybrid Time in The Living and the Dead

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Abstract: 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 pastorate 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.

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I have a disclaimer on this paper: like many conference papers, it's a work in progress, and I'll be working on it across three conferences this summer, so if you want to see how it develops, I'll post the versions online as they're delivered. And I mentioned on Twitter just last week that I was working on *The Living and the Dead*, and the series' creator Ashleigh Pharoah was summoned to my tweet by a mutual connection and pointed me to a fabulous series of blog entries for the British Association of Victorian Studies Postgraduate Blog by Emily Turner. The last one of these covered some very similar ground to what I want to discuss here, which has both encouraged and thrown me a little. I will try to build on her work, but the blog entries are well worth checking out.

The 2016 BBC series *The Living and the Dead* presented a series of hauntings on a late-nineteenth century Somerset estate, concentrating on the characters of Nathan and Charlotte Appleby. He returns to the family home to see his ailing mother. This is also the home where his son by a previous marriage died. He is accompanied by his second wife, a society photographer from London, where he has been practicing as a psychologist. The series is haunted by the past, by grief, and by response to change. But the present of the story is also haunted by its future, by our present, first in subtle ways but then increasingly obviously.

This is shown in the first episode, in the scene where Nathan's mother dies. As a first-person camera moves through the halls of the house, we hear a woman's voice calling 'Nathan'. Nathan's mother, in her room, clasping a snow globe of Vienna where Nathan had been to a conference, reacts with fear as her door opens, and she challenges the unseen presence, before her heart gives out. A close-up on the snow globe shows the reflection of a bright light, of a blue-white not seen elsewhere. That's because this is not a nineteenth-century light, but a twenty-first century one. Nathan's mother dies because she sees her great-great-granddaughter, who is / will be exploring the house in her own time as she tries to find out more about Nathan. But the mystery and tragedy of Nathan's story is centred around Shepzozy and the duties and responsibilities that he takes up there *following* his mother's death, rather than staying with his psychological practice and research in London. If the Twenty-First Century woman had not been responsible for the

Nineteenth Century woman's death, then there may not have been any reason for the Twenty-First Century woman to return to Shepzozy, and by doing so to cause the Nineteenth Century woman's death...

Now this could be seen as simply a ghost story doing what ghost stories do and presenting one segment of time being interrupted and disrupted by a moment from another. So why do I claim that this is about 'hybrid' time? Because these interruptions from past and future disrupt decision-making: people make choices based not just on what has happened in the past, but also based on seeing the future. However, the events from the future that lead to those decisions are themselves dependent on choices from the narrative present. This could get confusing. But what I want to emphasise is that there is a disruption here of cause and effect, that the series emphasises through narratives and setting that the interaction of different time frames is significant, and that this can be interpreted in relation to current anxieties about past and future.

I have already given one supernatural example of how events from the future affect the characters' present. But there are also examples of mundane considerations of the future affecting decisions, such as the introduction of a steam traction engine to the farm to enhance productivity, to take it into the future of industrialisation and farming. As Emily Turner has pointed out, Shepzozy is rather late in turning to agricultural steam power, which had been in use since the 1850s. This suggests that the place is already, in 1894, something of a time capsule of a previous era. Similarly, the plot line about attracting a railway line to the area to open up new markets seems more appropriate to the mid-nineteenth century rather than the end. While we as viewers may connect such narratives broadly to Victorian literature and its adaptations, be that *Tess of the Durbervilles* or *Cranford*, this condensing of Victorian narrative tropes into one space and time can also suggest the collapsing of time's arrow in the series. Rather than being part of temporal flow, Shepzozy is outside it, being in many ways part of a number of different temporalities all at the same time.

In any case, the adoption of the engine leads to disruption in the farm. John the ploughman urges his horses to him as he stands before them, so he is killed by horses and plough. This is apparently in despair at the changes that are coming, but in an action that could also be read as someone making a blood sacrifice to the land in reparation for these changes. It also marks the connection between ploughman and team - he draws them on with an apple and they respond to him untended - that is lost by the move to machinery.

More supernaturally, Nathan's great-great-great grand-daughter's cries have haunted the Appleby's in 1894, encouraging Nathan to believe that there is something supernatural in the house, but he interprets them as cries associated with his dead son. Emily Turner consider this as part of the series' emphasis on temporal cyclicity, tying in to the conception of the natural cycle of the agricultural year. There is certainly a repeated emphasis on recurring events, that an Appleby has 'always' led village rituals, that things are done as they were done before. The emphasis on cycles serves to set up a tension with the forward drive of the narrative, as Nathan helps to resolve other recurrences from the past that haunt the estate. And this also exists in a tension with the modern, industrialising thrust of Progress represented by the steam engine and the proposed arrival of the railway.

It is the reassuring aspect of cyclical time, where everything occurs in its season, that is part of the appeal of the past. Yet it is also the tension between cyclicity and its eternal return and time's arrow of modernity that lies at the heart of folk horror, which emphasises that there are both pleasures and perils in

that return. And we should note here the unremarked presence of a circle of standing stones on the estate, as well as the Summer Solstice and All Hallows' Eve rituals that are shown as part of Shepzoys life, and which echo the continuance or revival of pagan ritual that is found in much folk horror.

For the past here is depicted as both comforting, in that people knew their place and what was expected of them, and restricting. Those who did not fit in, who tried to find their own place, who breached expectations, are shown as being persecuted, and so they in turn return to persecute others. The past held the nightmare of the boys who died working in the mine, of the persecution of a wise woman as a witch, of the predatory murderer Abel North, all of whom return as ghosts. As Nathan's obsession with contacting his dead son grows, we are shown how an obsession with the past can be detrimental, as his own mental health deteriorates. Similarly, it is past treatment and the inability to fit in that drives Martha Enderby to her crimes. The past is not a good place to linger, not a place of golden heritage light and bounty and kindness.

Charlotte, meanwhile, represents hope for the future. This is not only in her technological connections, via her photography and her purchase of the steam engine, but also in her drive to manage and modernise the farm. She is a modern woman, looking to the future, including the future of her family, as she is haunted by the desire for a child. But the presence of the great-great-granddaughter with the 'book of light' shows us that, while that desire for a child may be fulfilled, the future of the family contains mental breakdown and a woman who will end up dying so that she can take care of the spirit of Nathan's son Gabriel in some afterlife. This presents an image of descendants' responsibility for their ancestors, something which we all face in how we care for the past of our families, and of our wider history. As the title of another BBC ghost serial states, the past always demands *Remember Me*.

There is something here of the time travel story, and particularly the characteristic that Mark Fisher stated made time travel narratives part of the 'weird'.¹ For Fisher, time travel narratives, particularly those that involve time paradoxes, are weird because they breach our understanding of causality: events from the future are the past causes of decisions made in the present. It should be noted as a potential future expansion of this material that *The Living and the Dead* was created by Ashley Pharoah, who was also one of the creators of *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes*, which also used apparent time-shifting and paradoxes in their psychological treatment of guilt and responsibility, themes which are also core to *The Living and the Dead*. Those ideas also appear in *Eternal Law* and *Bonekickers*, two other series created by Pharoah, with *Bonekickers* in particular being about the uncovering of the literally buried past and the effects of that past on the present.

For my immediate purposes, these notions of guilt and responsibility are important because of the ways they connect to causality. Rather than merely dealing with interruptions from other times, I want to consider *The Living and the Dead* in terms of 'hybrid time' because of the ways that it becomes essentially impossible to separate the different time periods in the narrative. And this in a way reflects our experience of time, where memories and ideas of the future and results of current decisions can only be experienced in the moment. We make our choices based, in part, on our memories of the past and our predictions of the future

¹ Fisher, Mark. *The Weird and the Eerie*. Repeater Books, 2016. p.40

consequences of our choices, but all is experienced in the moment. What the supernatural or time-travel narrative adds to this experience is a literalisation of the influence of the past and the possible future on the present, including the potential for a literally buried history having an effect on the present. Only in *The Living and the Dead*, it is not just the past that is buried, but the future as well.

In the final episode, baffled estate workers use a team of horses to haul a rotted carcass from the ground, a thing from another time. Gideon, the chief farmhand, expresses hope that by uncovering it they have discovered the infection that is causing all of the supernatural horrors in the village, and that hauling it away will be the end of it. But this is not the body of a demon pulled from beneath the furrows, or the remains of an ancient temple or tomb. It is the decaying wreck of an early 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 underlies the present (which is our past), and looks like it has been there for some time.

Thinking about the programme in relation to current anxieties, I want to particularly consider environmental concerns, which are suggested by the agricultural setting, 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 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.

The Applebys return to his family farm is a rejection of one future as young professionals in London in favour of a move back to the past, a rural idyll, albeit one haunted by the death of Nathan’s son at the farm, and marked by the Applebys’ responsibility as the managers and leaders of the farm estate. They seek to bring the benefits of modernity to the estate, but with the intention of doing so in order to preserve it and the livelihoods of those dependent upon it, rather than simply to maximise profit. Without modernisation, the farm will fail. As Appleby says, 'If we don't do something radical, this place will die.' At the same time, the Applebys support and take part in the traditional life and rituals of the local people, sometimes in opposition to modernity or to the teachings of the Church.

So we see the introduction of a steam engine to pull the plough, increasing efficiency. Then we see John the ploughman lay down before the plough so that he is killed, his blood feeding the land. When it comes to his burial, it is Nathan who overrides the singing of a hymn at the graveside by loudly singing a song of the harvest, one that might be thought of as a pagan survival, but also one that is associated more with the dead man’s life as a farmhand and his pride as a ploughman than with his soul after death. The past is paid tribute; the modern, such as Nathan’s psychology, uncovers the horrors of the past.

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. 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.’² 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 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-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 chance of losing ourselves.

Thank you.

² Boym, Svetlana, *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, p.xviii