

The Black Archive #16

CARNIVAL OF MONSTERS

Sampler



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9: 'JUST A LOOSE CONNECTION'¹

This brings us neatly to some of the wider satirical targets of the serial.

One very clear resonance at the time will have been Britain's relationship with Europe. *Carnival of Monsters* began transmission on 27 January, less than four weeks after the UK officially entered the Common Market, on 1 January 1973. Obviously that hadn't been planned when the programme was being devised in 1971, but the move was clearly on the cards and was already being reflected fictionally in **Doctor Who**. *The Curse of Peladon*, from the start of 1972, and *Frontier in Space* (1973) which would follow *Carnival of Monsters* directly on transmission were both stories that dealt with isolationist worlds making contact with other species and the anxieties over what that might entail².

One very specific related anxiety of the 1970s that *Carnival of Monsters* tapped into beyond straightforward xenophobia was a fear of disease spread by increased international contact. Millions were known to have died worldwide in the Asian and Hong Kong flu pandemics of the late 1950s and the end of the 1960s respectively, and fear of such events recurring informed a great deal of popular science fiction of the time. **Doctor Who** writer Terry Nation, in particular, was repeatedly drawn to the theme of plague, most famously in his TV series **Survivors** (1975-77).

Closer ties to Europe raised the specific fear of the spread of rabies, a disease absent in the UK at the time, but still present in domestic dogs in Spain and Italy, and in wild animals like foxes as close to the UK as France³. The UK's animal quarantine laws were strict to prevent rabies reaching Britain, and through the 1970s UK TV regularly screened Public Information Films warning of the disease's danger and advising holiday-makers against smuggling animals back into the UK⁴. It's probably in this context that the Inter Minorian tribunal's alarm at unregistered livestock reaching their world should be understood⁵.

Probably the serial's most remarked-on line with clear political resonance is Orum's pronouncement about the Functionaries, which Barry Letts comments on specifically in *Writing for Television in the 70s*: 'They've no sense of responsibility. Give them a hygiene chamber and they store fossil fuel in it'⁶.

In its original form (along the lines of 'Give them a bath and they'd store coal in it'), it's a line with a rich political history, paraphrasing a snobbish disregard for the living conditions of workers and specifically miners that dates back to the early 20th century. It's quoted in George Orwell's *The Road*

¹ Vorg, episode 1.

² Coincidentally, Draconia – the world in *Frontier in Space* – has also suffered from a history of space plague. In Draconia's case the isolationism may stem more directly from the Japanese inspirations for Draconian culture, drawing on Japan's historical period of withdrawal, known as Sakoku.

³ There is by chance something of the rabid dog in the Drashigs. Their heads are built around the skulls of fox terrier dogs, their distinctive call incorporates the slowed down howls of sound designer Brian Hodgson's corgi bitch and at least one of them froths alarmingly at the mouth. Check out the raw model filming on the Special Edition DVD set for far more bubbly-mouthed Drashig action than you ever thought you'd need.

⁴ A number of these anti-rabies public information films can be found online. A 1976 example may be viewed on the National Archives site and several more have been uploaded to YouTube by private individuals.

⁵ In *Inside The TARDIS*, James Chapman also posits the 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Act and 1971 Immigration Act as potential influences (Chapman, James, *Inside the TARDIS: The Worlds of Doctor Who* pp95-96). Certainly, their restriction of UK residence rights available to subjects of former British colonies will have heightened general awareness of issues of racism, immigration policy and the legacy of empire, all of which have some bearing on *Carnival of Monsters*.

⁶ Episode 1.

to *Wigan Pier* and is referred to several times in Hansard, the official record of the Houses of Parliament, though its original source remains obscure⁷.

In the popular imagination, and certainly amongst **Doctor Who** fans⁸, it's connected with the General Strike and this may well be the reason Holmes chose to use it. The General Strike occurred between 3 and 12 May 1926, and is seen by some commentators on the left as a key galvanising event in a struggle to democratise Britain⁹. It seems Major Daly and Claire, part of a social class many strikers had a clear grievance with and might like to see swept away, have left England while the strike is ongoing. Whether this is deliberate on Holmes' part is essentially unknowable (he may simply have had a fondness for 1926 because it was the year of his birth), but again there may be more connecting his two sets of fossils than meets the eye¹⁰.

This is not to paint Holmes as a left-wing or polemical writer. Holmes had a clear fondness for these end of Empire characters, they're from a period, class and milieu he enjoyed writing, and he consistently played down any serious intent behind his work. His personal politics are never raised in interviews, though Terrance Dicks has described himself as soft left as opposed to Malcolm Hulke's hard left¹¹, and has placed Holmes' politics as to the right of his own.

The situation is muddled in what is perhaps Holmes' most overtly political script – *The Sun Makers*, which combines the Doctor aiding a popular revolution against rapacious capitalism, with paraphrased Karl Marx quotations, lot of jokes about runaway inflation, liquidation, nods and winks to government forms and cash machines. Like *Carnival of Monsters*, it is operating on several levels and seems more interested in its rogues and villains than the oppressed masses. Holmes openly admitted it was partially inspired by frustration with his own dealings with the Inland Revenue. Working as both a freelancer and a salaried BBC employee during this period no doubt made his tax returns more complex than the norm and his bill harder to calculate. Despite that seemingly individualistic inspiration, one struggles to find in it any strong ideological conviction, beyond Holmes suspicion of the red tape that restrains his beloved rogues and tricksters and the hardly problematic position that people shouldn't be exploited (except possibly by rogues and tricksters). As Holmes said in relation to *The Sun Makers*:

'...I always try to avoid plonking the moral a bit too heavily. Aside from the fact that it usually spoils the story, who am I to lecture people?'¹²

⁷ The earliest reference to the phrase in Hansard, where it is always used rhetorically to undermine a perceived Tory attitude, comes from Noel Billing on 7 April 1919. A 1926 reference alludes to it being a point of view that has been opposed now for 15 years. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) the phrase is already treated as 'an old saw'.

⁸ The phrase originating in the General Strike has been referred to inter alia in a review of the VHS release in the fanzine *Time-Space Visualiser* and in *Doctor Who: The Complete History* volume 19.

⁹ The Strike was crushed and its direct impact is hard to measure, but in popular history it's recalled as a powerful indicator of the strength of the workers.

¹⁰ Indeed the Raj is also beginning its slow dissolution by this point, as the non-cooperation movement in India gains strength through the 1920s.

¹¹ Cook, Benjamin, 'He Never Gives In... He's Never Cruel or Cowardly', DWM 508, February 2017.

¹² Wicks, Matthew, 'Robert Holmes Interview', *Renegade*, issue 1, quoted in Molesworth, *Robert Holmes*, p334.