

Why Blake's 7 remains relevant today, 40 years after it was first broadcast on BBC1 – by Lee Russell

In the world of Dr Who, there are fixed points in Space-Time where events have such deep effects on the timeline of the Universe that they must not be altered, for fear of damaging reality itself. In our real-world lives I believe there are similar events that become fixed anchors in our personal timelines; these are the events that shape our lives and help to define who we are. On 2nd January 1978 one of those moments happened for me.

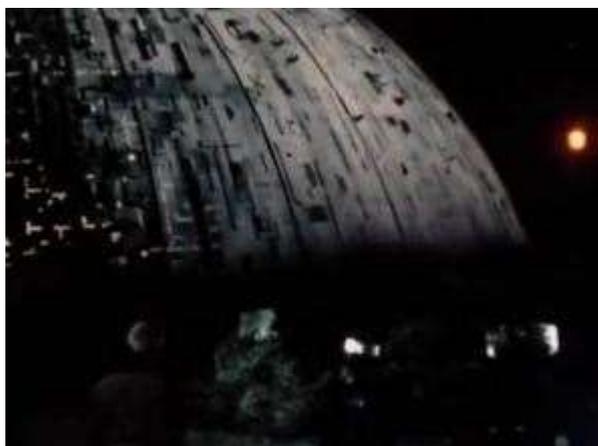
On that day I was 10 years and 8 months old, and about to have an imagination-defining experience. Yep, you can do the maths, that makes me 51 years and 3 months old as I write this article, and that event is still shaping my imagination today!

I'm so glad that it happened and I nearly missed it! I'd told my parents that a new programme was going to be broadcast on BBC1 at 6:00PM and I REALLY wanted to see it. That evening we had all been out in my Dad's van while my Mum finished some work and it was a rush to get home inside to see it.

We made it just in time to hear that glorious theme music...

'DAH HHHH, D DAH DAH, DAH DAH, DAHDLY DAH, DAHDLY DAH, DAHDLY DAH, DAHDLY DAH!'

... and to see the opening credits which were promising everything:



The zoom out from a domed city on Earth,

The transition to a computer-generated, pixelated image of Blake screaming in pain, which then...

Morphs onto the lens of a black security camera, before we see...

A Federation Trooper in overalls and futuristic helmet who then fires his gun right at us!

All in the first 13 seconds!



The shot is clearly aimed at the pixelated Blake, whose face is now subtitled with one word: ELIMINATE, in computerised letters.

Blake's face then melts into a planetary space scene before a very futuristic-looking spacecraft with a central hull and three pods on vanes bears down on us!



We then see that ship, the Liberator, moving directly away before it is replaced by the Federation logo overlain with the programme title: **"Blake's 7"**

WOW! What an introduction... it had it all!

Futuristic cities, spaceships, technology, computers and computer graphics, good guys, bad guys, surveillance, the threat of violence and implied resistance – what more could the ten years old me have wanted? It was PERFECT and I was hooked, even before a single line had been spoken.



To understand the appeal and excellence of Blake's 7 I think you have to understand a few things about science fiction fans in general, and the state of UK society in the late 1970s to early 1980s in particular.

It has been my experience that people who don't like sci-fi, the kind that Douglas Adams might have labelled as 'strags' (non-hitchhikers, see chapter 3 of 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy'), are often very critical of B7:

- They say it had wobbly sets – they're right, sometimes it did.
- They say it had funny costumes and silly aliens – sometimes it did.
- They say the special effects were very bad and unrealistic – sometimes they were.
- They say you could see the spaceship models hanging from strings, and some of those models looked very childish – you often could, and sometimes they were right.

All of those criticisms miss the point of sci-fi, which is about Big Ideas... and Blake's 7 had some Huge Ideas right from the very start.

Fans will forgive any amount of technical problems with the presentation of a story as long as that story is exceptional, and with B7 Terry Nation had created an exceptional storyline.

Today, what is perhaps an even more modern-realistic telling of the Blake's 7 story can be found in the re-imagined audio stories 'Rebel', 'Traitor' and 'Liberator' penned by Ben Aaronovitch. These stories remain true to the central ideas and ideals of Terry Nation's TV creation, and in some ways enhance them. For example, Travis' character has more depth, while the discovery and acquisition of the Liberator seem more realistic.

So what was the UK like in 1979?

Computers were only just penetrating mainstream society. These machines had previously been exclusively technical constructs, used for such edifying purposes as helping to put a man on the moon, business data processing, weather prediction and aircraft and ship designing, to more questionable activities like cryptographic analysis (espionage, security) and nuclear weapons designs. Things were changing and this technology was soon to permeate right down to individual homes.



1977 had just seen Tandy release the TRS-80 Micro Computer System, a desktop microcomputer with a QWERTY keyboard, a 64-character per line monitor, the new Zilog Z80 processor, 4 KB of RAM and an implementation of the BASIC programming language. Costing the equivalent of about US\$2500, it was a forerunner of what was coming. In the same year Apple demonstrated the Apple II, offering colour graphics and an audio cassette drive for storage. **Computer technology was NEW, and it was exciting to think that we could be programming machines to do our bidding!** Little did we appreciate the profound impact they would have on employment though... but that's another story.

The ubiquity of computers in the Blake's 7 universe, their computational power (Zen, Orac), their ability to process massive datasets (the children's records in the Domed City in Episode 1, for example), their huge screens and voice control, was unprecedented in mainstream public experience, and as a schoolboy I found the idea of it very exciting.

By the early 1980s I was learning to program using Z80-based, RML-380Z computers built by 'Research Machines' in Oxford. These machines are now rare to find in good working order and sell for around £500 – £1,000 depending on their condition. The ones in my school had 56k of RAM, 5 1/4" or 8" floppy disk drives and high-resolution graphics boards. I learnt to program in Assembly Language, BASIC, COBOL, some Pascal and Fortran, and those skills have kept me in good stead (and steady employment) for the next 30+ years, so some good came from it all!



Technology also manifested in the form of CCTV cameras that appeared during the late 1970s. These looked a lot like the camera in the show's opening titles; they were big, clunky, robotic looking things that really



intruded into the public spaces where they were deployed. Suddenly there was a new terrible feeling of being watched and followed wherever you went. These cameras were increasingly seen as an assault on individual's liberal rights to privacy and personal freedom. Spin forward just a few years and we see the introduction of smaller devices, night-vision / infrared capable sensors and pan-tilting mounts. CCTV spread like a rash and today the UK is the most surveilled nation on Earth, with circa 6 million cameras in use (2016 estimate). This is the surveillance culture that Terry Nation tapped into during the opening scenes of

Episode 1 – who can forget those black cameras pivoting to watch the Dome City's inhabitants as they moved around?

What Terry Nation could not have predicted was how deeply the internet embedded itself in society, enabling governments and global tech-giants to know who we are, what we are reading, what we are watching, who we are talking to, where we eat, where we travel, our health details, biometric details, our phone calls, text messages... it goes on and on and on. It still surprises me that a nation which traditionally put such a high value on Privacy and Personal Freedoms allowed this situation to develop, but I think it happened a bit like eating a salami, one slice at a time. Today's reality is much worse than Terry Nation predicted with B7 and just an ideological step away from the Far Right state predicted by Orwell in '1984' – Travis would love this modern world, finding and eliminating Blake would have been simple.



Our understanding of the Social-Political-Economic backdrop for Blake's 7 is completed with the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party to power after five years of Labour Party governance under Harold Wilson ('74 – '76) and James Callaghan ('76 – '79). Callaghan had a tiny majority in Parliament and faced rampant Trade Union strikes that came to a head in the 'Winter of Discontent' (Winter '78-'79). Public employees were walking out leaving food and fuel undelivered, rubbish uncollected, and bodies unburied. What government can survive when it can't feed its people or bury the dead? Callaghan's didn't, and on 3rd May 1979 he was ousted in the polls by Margaret Thatcher.



Thatcher was a completely different kind of political animal. She exuded a confident, indomitable spirit and would not accept weakness anywhere, in herself, her cabinet or the wider Central/Local government. Dubbed "the Iron Lady" by the media, Thatcher broke the Trade Unions' hold over the country and re-made the UK economy with a new approach that was dubbed 'Thatcherism'. Out went Keynesianism, belief in the welfare state 'looking after' the population, deeply nationalised industry and close regulation of the British economy. In came a belief that through entrepreneurialism people could quietly look after themselves, that success came to those who worked for it, monetarism with a priority on controlling inflation over unemployment, social conservatism over liberalism. It was a time of great opportunity for those who could reach higher into the new technological age and look after themselves. It was also a time of great suffering for those who couldn't, and their scars still run deep in UK

society today. ***How much of the character of Servalan was influenced by Thatcher and Thatcherism, I wonder?***

Not exactly an optimistic time, and perhaps that is part of the reason why Blake's 7 resonated with so many viewers?

This Social-Political-Economic backdrop must have helped to shape the series' characters:

Blake – a former dissident who was brainwashed into betraying his friends and then believing that his murdered-by-the-State family were still alive. When he eventually learns some of the truth he starts to fight back. Whatever happens he will be 'everyman' with a unique claim on the show's moral high ground.

Avon – a convicted computer fraudster – an obvious choice.

Villa – a master thief, drinker, gambler, sometimes lazy coward. With those credentials he might be hard to empathise with, but Michael Keating portrayed him with a transparent working class honesty that was quite appealing. Perhaps Villa represents the fortunes of the working classes, similar to...

Gan – convicted of killing a Federation officer who had killed his girlfriend. He was big, strong, not highly educated but often the calm voice of common sense.

Jenna – a powerful, alpha-class female character. A top spaceship pilot and rather cynical smuggler. Perhaps she represents the social dialogue about self-reliance that would come with Thatcherism?

Cally – a telepath from the planet Auron. She had been helping freedom fighters on the planet Saurian Major resist the Federation. When the Federation killed all the rebels by releasing “poison from the sky”, she decided to stay and fight, to “destroy until I am destroyed”.

Cally is perhaps a purer expression of the resistance that we understand Blake was leading. Not a convicted criminal, she is initially almost fanatical about fighting the Federation before developing more into the ‘moral conscience’ of Blake’s team. In her earlier episodes she perhaps expresses the solid determination that many people wished they had to stand up against the changing world.

Cally reminds me a lot of my character ‘Lissa Blackwood’ in my thriller novel ‘Evil Eye’. Lissa Blackwood describes herself as a ‘fierce, woman warrior’. She also is a soldier with a solid moral core who will persist in the face of any challenge to get the job done and keep the UK safe. I hope I have portrayed her with as much integrity as Jan Chappell played Cally in the TV series.



It seems to me that the UK’s problems in 1978-1981, when the 4 seasons of Blake’s 7 were originally broadcast, are still present today. If anything the divide between social classes has widened and the privileged security of the elites has only increased. In the meantime the continued development of new technologies continues to leave large swathes of society unemployable, or living in fear of unemployment, while State monitoring of citizens only ever seems to expand and ‘the system’ remains as cold-hearted as in Thatcher’s days.

What in 1978 was perhaps a warning about the direction that a right-of-centre (Conservative) government could take the UK, seems more like reality each day. Maybe Blake’s 7 remains a useful prompt for future generations of imaginations, reminding us that the status quo is there to be questioned, challenged, and sometimes resisted.

There’s more from Lee Russell at www.russellweb.org.uk and  @LeeJ_Russell

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