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The Dominick Hide plays

Philip Braithwaite

As a child, Alan Gibson had listened to his family members discussing sightings of UFOs, and wondered if they might in fact be from the future rather than outer space. Years later, now a television director, Gibson took his idea to writer Jeremy Paul. Paul was sceptical at first, until Gibson explained that he wanted to tell a story that was grounded in relationship issues as much as the tropes of science fiction[i].

The result was *The Flipside of Dominick Hide* (1980), one of the later Plays for Today. Its science fiction status makes it something of an anomaly in this series—one of only two to explore that genre, the other being its sequel, *Another Flip for Dominick* (1982). The plays' protagonist, Dominick Hide (played by a young Peter Firth, projecting a kind of wild-eyed enthusiasm and curiosity, and looking like a perfect cross between the two *Doctor Who* actors of the era, Peter Davison and Colin Baker), lives in 2130 with his wife Ava. His job is to observe transport in 1980—the 'flipside'—the era before the mysterious holocaust, which happened in 1999. He carries out his duties by means of a 'flying saucer'—the object that first jolted Gibson's imagination—with which he travels in time and hovers over London's 20th century skies. He then reports to Caleb, his superior, with the information he has discovered. Dominick believes his great-great-grandfather is on his 'circuit' on the flipside. He wants to see for himself, but people in Dominick's time are forbidden to land in the 'flipside' because of the possibility of changing the timeline. In the first play Dominick manages to enlist his colleague Elrich, a mechanic who arranges landings, to help him make an illicit landing in London in 1980.

Dominick—now calling himself Gilbey after glancing at a Gilbey's gin bottle when asked his name—is woefully under-prepared for life in the 1980s. He arrives in a black, shiny suit and large silver hat, which to the people of 1980 looks like the uniform of some religious order, and he seems largely oblivious to their confusion. He makes various social gaffes, including berating people in a rather anachronistic way for smoking, and revealing his complete ignorance on the subject of money.

The 'grandfather paradox' story, first discussed in early American science fiction magazines like *Amazing Stories*, describes the scenario of travelling to the past and killing one's grandfather, thus erasing one's own existence. In a reversal of that, Dominick in the

first play, doesn't *meet* his great-grandfather, but rather *creates* him: Dominick and Jane—one of the group of friends—start a relationship, and the rest of the play centres around its development and her eventual pregnancy, leaving Dominick to become his own great-great grandfather. Towards the end of the first play Caleb admits to Dominick that this was all planned—he knew that Dominick was one of the few people who were caught in this kind of temporal paradox (which Caleb calls 'a genetic time-slip') and he was allowed to carry out this 'mission' to ensure his own existence.

But of course, in keeping with Gibson and Paul's interests, the plays are more romantic drama than science fiction exploration, articulating a contest between a kind of sanitised-but-dull existence, and a life lived organically, in harmony with nature. Dominick begins to yearn for the latter: key scenes take place on the beach—it's where he sees his great-grandfather playing as a child in the film footage his great aunt owns, and it's where, on the 'flipside', he and Jane go for their 'dirty weekend' late in the first play. Jane symbolises, at least for Dominick, a return to nature. He's even able to extract a 'lesson' from their interaction—one which perhaps encapsulates the theme of both plays. He tells her, 'I take terrible risks to see you, but you give me such life, vitality, which I take back. There's so much that we've lost. You're my gift to my own people.' What he takes with him is an appreciation of her spontaneity and ease—a spirit of adventure and freedom that has been replaced in his own time with routine and structure.

Dominick's version of the future is not the grimy, dystopian wasteland seen in movies like *Mad Max*, nor the psychedelic utopia presented in something like *UFO* (1970) with women on the Moonbase in revealing glittering outfits and pink hair—what John Cook (2009) called, 'a veritable sexual playground … a late-1960s male liberatory fantasy'[ii]. Rather, Dominick's future is closer to a kind of sterile 'future chic' often found in mid and later 1970s and 80s series. In the domestic sphere they have simple living rooms with *shoji*-type doors. After shedding their skin-tight reflective work clothes, characters usually relax in *kimonos*. When Dominick first enters his apartment, his wife is watching an instrumental performance of The Beatles' 'Yesterday' on screen with performers in Japanese outfits (sadly the timing was off here, with the play broadcast very soon after John Lennon's death). The work environment contains shiny, well-defined metallic surfaces, simple décor, and a strong sense of calm social order. Episodes of *Doctor Who* that sought to show the future often presented something similar. Even the future depicted in the first *Blake's 7* episode 'The Way Back' looked comparable.

The difference, though, is that behind these clean surfaces, many science fiction series of the 1980s were engaging in a much darker political commentary. Though series like *Blake's 7* (1978-81), presented a clean aesthetic in the citadel, the politics buried beneath the surfaces were much more radical. *Blake's 7*, which M. Keith Booker calls 'one of the darkest science fiction series ever to appear on television'[iii], *Sapphire & Steel* (1979-82) and even *Doctor Who* of the era were dealing with issues like terrorism, immigration, race, and the effects of monetarism, as well as critiques of the individualistic enterprise that was championed by Thatcher's government. *Blake's 7* ends with all the protagonists slaughtered by the dystopian Federation, so seemingly affected by Thatcherite politics of individualism and personal enrichment that they have become more yuppies than freedom fighters, and are unable to find commonality enough to fight as an organised collective; *Sapphire & Steel* lingers in a Britain where time has come apart—the past and future start to impinge on the present. The series portrays a bleak version of the 1980s, entombed in a nondescript present, facing what Fisher calls 'the slow cancellation of the future'[iv]. At the end of *Sapphire & Steel* the two protagonists are trapped, apparently forever, in a floating prison in space, betrayed by the (in many ways Thatcherite) authority they served.

But, unlike the above or many contemporaneous Plays for Today which delved into left-wing politics, the *Dominick Hide* plays are not primarily furthering a political agenda. While there is a scene early on in which it is mentioned that one of Jane's friends, Felix, is writing a book on a new kind of economic system (one in which money is abolished), and a scene later portrays an unctuous amusement park owner as a kind of Thatcherite entrepreneur; there is very little to critique (or support) the new entrepreneurial spirit that Thatcherism tried to champion, nor Thatcher's image of a 'new Victorianism'. Instead, life in 1980s London is depicted as messy, chaotic, and sexually permissive.

There are only hints of social or political discontent throughout the plays, arriving by way of the sometimes-too-orderly nature of the future society. Even Dominick admits that his work seems overly pedantic and futile. Space in their city is economical rather than generous; even people's modes of speech are clipped and utilitarian, as in the exchange Dominick has with Caleb, his manager:

> CALEB: Complacent with your mission, Dominick? Amusing, the history of transport … Why then were you two minutes late in your double-return? Machine fault?
>
> DOMINICK: No. I'm sorry.

CALEB: I accept apology. Reason?

DOMINICK: It was raining …

There may be utopian implications in this future, but it is tempered somewhat by an implied authoritarianism, as shown in the dialogue above. The holocaust's origin or circumstances are never explained. What replaced it seems at the very least to be an extremely conservative society, in which it is forbidden to leave the city without permission. The propaganda in Dominick's time revolves largely around hygiene—as well as adhering strongly to the rule about bathing before sex, Ava is worried that the beach is dirty, full of bacteria, and refuses Dominick's suggestion of going there (which would, in any case, require permission from the authorities).

Yet, despite the focus on the politics of love, there is something politically and personally unsettling about the 'relationship' at the heart of the story: it never quite rings true. The tone is set at the beginning of the first play with the saccharine song, 'You'd Better Believe It, Babe' by Meal Ticket, playing as Dominick scans London from the point of view of his flying saucer. Before they become lovers, Dominick walks in on Jane in the bath, apparently unaware that it's inappropriate. She laughs it off, but never considers it disturbing. All throughout, Jane accepts too easily that she is being manipulated by Dominick, and Dominick seems duplicitous in the way he conducts himself (though there is also an innocence about him that implies he is genuine within each moment). He tells her often that he loves her, knowing there is no possible future, and knowing too that he has a wife in his own time. When, in a sub-plot, Dominick's flying saucer is taken to an amusement park in Herne Bay, he persuades Jane to drive him there. They have a day at the beach, but then Dominick goes to the amusement park to retrieve his saucer. Jane witnesses Dominick arguing with the manager of the park, and assumes Dominick is some kind of fraudster. At this point Jane realises she has been conned:

JANE: Doesn't do much for a girl's morale, Gilbey, to know she's only been used for a free ride to Herne Bay.

DOMINICK: Stop. I only want to be with you.

But we know that it's impossible for Dominick to be with her. In any case he convinces her, all too easily, to have 'a dirty weekend in a guest house' in her words.

Dominick is taking advantage of her even here, because the next morning he knows he must depart back to his own time.

There is an implied patriarchal privilege here—Dominick is allowed to 'have his cake and eat it'—to visit Jane and have an affair with her, as well as maintaining his marriage in his own time. In their antiseptic present, Dominick tells his wife about Jane and the 'mission', and while it causes Ava discomfort, what she seems most to want to know is whether sex was different with Jane. The answer is yes, mainly because in 2130 one must bathe before the act. He tries to show Ava a more natural method of intercourse, but she is nervous. Ava symbolises the other side of this dichotomy—efficiency, order, cleanliness; all of which Dominick is finding increasingly undesirable.

Dominick returns to 1980 later and tells Jane the truth about his origin. Though she reacts badly and orders him to leave forever when he first tells her the truth, she is nonetheless more pliable next time he visits her, now seemingly able to accept the situation with good humour, especially when he brings her a newspaper from a week ahead so that they can discover the football results, and Jane can win the football pools. Once Jane realises that he is telling the truth she hugs him and seems remarkably happy and loving towards him, yet she must realise that he has saddled her with a child, and will be absent for his upbringing.

Dominick returns in *Another Flip for Dominick* (1982). In that play, the opening sequence shows Dominick and Ava cavorting at the beach with their child, symbolising a harmony between Dominick's present and past, which is the theme of the sequel. In this play Dominick must retrieve his student who has illegally landed in 1982 (there is some progress: the student has learned enough about the necessity of money that he has taken to robbing parking meters). He tells his wife that he won't visit Jane and his son, and immediately sets about doing just that. He finds that Jane has married and her husband is out of town on business. Although he and Jane get along somewhat happily and he takes video footage of her and his son, later he watches from afar while Jane happily meets her new husband at the airport. This is Dominick's 1980s swan song: he must now jettison any trace of that life and return fully to the world of 2130. Ava leaves him, so he erases Jane and his son with her, both physically destroying the video footage he took of them, and emotionally removing them from his thoughts. He is then able to reconcile with Ava, thus re-establishing the conservative primacy of the family order, which the first play called into question.

The plays use science fiction to present a contest between natural and unnatural; spontaneous and stifling; order and chaos, and Dominick's two women represent both

extremes. Eventually he combines both in the person of Ava, in ways that are not completely satisfying. As the Thatcher era began to find its stride, the BBC was watched more closely, its budgets subject to more scrutiny. The corporation was to become extremely wary of producing science fiction as the 1980s progressed, eventually commissioning the bulk of it from adaptations of novels—such was their uncertainty about its quality. The *Dominick Hide* plays stand alone as outliers in the series, and for that reason and others they have garnered a cult following.

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[i] Information accessed from Hewett, Richard. 'The Flipside of Dominick Hide (1980)'. *BFI Screenonline*, accessed 20/8/20. http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/714453/index.html#:~:text=A%20rare%20science%2Dfiction%20entry,Portobello%20Road%20clothes%2Dshop%20owner.

[ii] Cook, J. R. "The Age of Aquarius: Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Late 1960s' and Early 1970s' British Science Fiction Television." *British Science Fiction Television: A Hitchhiker's Guide*, edited by J. R. Cook and Peter Wright, IB Tauris Publishers, 2006, pp. 93-115.

[iii] Booker, M. K. *Science Fiction Television: A History*. Praeger Publishers, 2004.

[iv] Fisher, Mark. 'An Extract From *Ghosts Of My Life*.' *The Quietus*, Aug 2013. http://thequietus.com/articles/13004-mark-fisher-ghosts-of-my-life-extract.