"Wealth Is the Only Reality": *Blake's 7* and Thatcherism

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ABSTRACT: At the time of Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979, British science fiction television changed its focus and style. It replaced the traditional moral standards and collectivism of the consensus era with individualism, Machiavellian behaviour and moral relativity.

In this paper I look at one of the series of this era, *Blake's 7* (1978–1981), alongside the rise of Thatcherism. Using Darko Suvin's notion of "cognitive estrangement," I analyse how the series engages with its political milieu and investigate how it anticipated the tropes of Thatcherism.

Blake's 7 ultimately presents a strong critique of many aspects of Thatcherism, from Thatcher's stated belief in individualism and independence to her authoritarian style of leadership, and reflects on some of the failings of the neoliberal economic system in its early stages.

KEYWORDS: *Blake's 7*, British television, ethics, dystopia, politics, cognitive estrangement, science fiction, Thatcherism

INTRODUCTION

Blake's 7 (1978–1981) is a British dystopian, or anti-utopian, science fiction television series.[1] It follows the exploits of an often-changing line-up of rebels in a future society

that is ruled, almost entirely, by a corrupt political power known as the Terran Federation. The early seasons follow these rebels as they navigate space in a ship called the *Liberator*, while trying to derail the Federation. Operating on Earth and several other planets, the Federation controls every movement of its citizens, through brainwashing techniques, as well as constant monitoring, police brutality, and general corruption. Parallels to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) abound, with intimations of Aldous Huxley's "soma"-dependent society in *Brave New World* (1932), and the series shows its influences, drawing from this anti-utopian tradition of English science fiction literature.[2]

There are many ways in which *Blake's 7* subverts the generic expectations of science fiction television series of the era—expectations driven by the series that preceded it in Britain. One of the clearest departures is the brutal, Machiavellian behaviour of its protagonists.[3] This behaviour springs from a strong sense of individualism—a value that would become part of the ethos in Thatcherite Britain, the beginning of which coincided with the transmission of the series. Another subversion is the series' ending, in which the rebels are all murdered by the Federation, presenting a message of apparent futility in political struggle, while also positing some messages about the dangers of individualism.

With reference to Darko Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement, discussed shortly, I will argue that the dystopian elements in *Blake's 7* anticipate and assess some of the changes to Britain that Thatcherism eventually brought about. These changes include the worst excesses of the neoliberal economic system, which has now become the political and economic standard in most of the Western World and seems to continue uncontested.[4] In those comparisons we can detect a dialogue with the rise of Thatcherism, and can determine some of the social structure of Britain at the time.

Una McCormack considers the series, to some extent, to be positioned between the two most prominent post-war utopian experiments: the USA and the USSR, and their opposing ideologies.[5] *Blake's 7* begins in a position closer to left-wing revolutionary idealism in the person of Blake, but there is enough criticism within the series of Blake's position to distance it from this simple reading and move it closer to a

general critique of authoritarian power. The series was created at a time when Britain was perceived to be on the decline by way of the collapse of the Labour party in the events leading to 1979's "Winter of Discontent."[6] Appropriately, the series trades in inertia and decline, and criticises what McCormack calls the "false promise" of technological progress—a feature it shares with ITV's *Sapphire & Steel* (1979–1982), which was broadcast around the same time.[7] If *Blake's 7* was conceived to be about freedom fighters engaged in a struggle against authoritarian power, it evolved into an individualistic race for Darwinian survival in which the most ruthless win. But no one ultimately wins in *Blake's 7*. As a critique of any system that purports to be utopian, and a story of failure in the cause of revolution, *Blake's 7* carries a message of apparent futility. I argue, however, that the series is ultimately a critique of the emerging system of individualism that found its fullest expression in the Thatcher era.

The first part of this paper discusses Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement, as well as his ruminations on neoliberal economics. The second part sketches out the basic tropes of Thatcherism and the ways in which Thatcherism changed Britain. I then go on to discuss the background to *Blake's 7* and how it connects with the political philosophies of both Thatcherism and the "consensus era" in Britain that preceded it. This will lead to a discussion of *Blake's 7* and Thatcherism broadly, before drilling down into some of the more specific aspects of Thatcherism and its connection with the series. Finally, I will discuss the last season of *Blake's 7* and consider the different readings of the series' final episodes, which interpret the ending as either one of futility or a warning against the emerging ideology of Thatcherism.

1. SUVIN'S COGNITIVE ESTRANGEMENT

Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement suggests that science fiction is able to comment on society through both its proximity to, and its distance from, the subject, by creating a dialectical interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Douglass Kellner and Michel Ryan present a similar concept, which they call "temporal displacement," writing, "Fantasies of the future may simply be ways of putting quotation marks around the present."[8] Suvin drew his notion from Bertolt Brecht,

who wrote and directed for the theatre with his company, the Berliner Ensemble, and is acknowledged as one of theatre's most important theorists. Suvin was particularly influenced by Brecht's theory of *Verfremdungseffekt*, often translated as "estrangement" or "distanciation." Brecht was interested in the theatre's capacity to present this estrangement, so that his audience would be encouraged to assess a theatrical performance from a detached perspective, rather than be drawn in by it as fiction.

When he first wrote on science fiction, Suvin imagined human society developing towards a more utopian future, somewhat informed by Brecht's Marxist agenda. In his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979 in English), Suvin writes: "As a minimum, we must demand from SF that it be wiser than the world it speaks to," indicating a more utopian function of the genre, which might serve as a guiding light for those living in present-day reality.[9] Since then, Suvin has developed a more dystopian view of recent history; the world did not develop the way he imagined in his earlier writing, nor has science fiction writing. He attributes this trend in large part to the rise of neoliberal economics, commenting:

> The central shift of horizons … is that up to 1991 I was still confident that the antifascist impetus and achievements of my youth could be carried on—with whatever modifications towards a New Left and whatever huge difficulties in finding a way between capitalism and Stalinism.[10]

Suvin claims that much science fiction writing has shifted towards the dystopian and, as Philip E. Wegner notes, he lays much of the blame on writers "too readily conceding to the central Thatcher/Reagan-era doctrine dubbed TINA ('There is no alternative')." Wenger observes that such authors, according to Suvin, present "the global neo-liberal free market order … as 'inevitable and unchangeable,' and the primary concern becomes how one might survive within it."[11] *Blake's 7* anticipates the rise of this new system offers an early examination, within generic television science fiction, of "how one might survive within it." In a discussion of neoliberalism that might apply to the series and its relation to Thatcherism, Suvin writes:

> we have to liberate the TINA slogan hijacked by Mrs Thatcher and say that
> there is no (acceptable) alternative to eutopia, a radically better organization
> of people's lives together. For the alternative is the electronico-genetic police
> state based on caste, whose Argus eyes we see today hanging above every
> street-corner.[12]

Where *Blake's 7* may be "wiser than the world it speaks to," that wisdom arrives in a dystopian package, and is therefore of a cautionary variety.

2. THATCHERISM

Beginning in 1979, the Thatcher administration changed British politics in some fundamental ways. It replaced what became known as the "consensus era," which spanned from the end of the Second World War to the late 1970s and arguably saw a broad consensus between the two major parties on social and economic issues (but which was seen to be in crisis by the late 1970s). Instead, Margaret Thatcher's government installed a free market mentality, inspired by Milton Friedman's Chicago School of Economics, as well as the work of economist Friedrich Hayek. Hayek, a proponent of the neoliberal worldview, saw the free market as a kind of hive mind that would be more powerful at regulating the economy and people's needs than governments. This was the new kind of right-wing political position that Thatcherism embraced: socially conservative and economically radical.

Thatcher's style of governance was beset by contradiction. She believed strongly in a return to Victorian ethics—"Those were the values when our country became great," she once declared—with the xenophobia implicit.[13] During the Thatcher administration, her government introduced several authoritarian measures, including greatly enhancing the powers of the police. But at the same time Thatcher was strongly in favour of market liberalism and independence, especially from the machinations of the state. Stuart Hall characterises this contrary position as "marching towards the future clad in the armour of the past."[14] Thatcher drew her moral positions from both sides: Victorian social values, and the "freedom" drawn from economic liberalism.

While Thatcherism never championed Machiavellianism or selfishness *per se*, it did place a great emphasis on independence and strongly presented the case for the type of individualism brought about by economic freedom. It also restructured the economic system to favour the individual (and indeed the *wealthy* individual), rather than the collective. This led to an increase in individualistic behaviour in society—both positive and negative—because people were granted access to a global economy with lower tax rates and far fewer regulations than ever before. *Blake's 7* anticipates some of the ways these themes would be embedded in British society. However, the Thatcherite version of independence was narrow, as evidenced by Thatcher's attempts to control the messaging around the BBC, to commercialise it and to promote her own ministers to the board.[15] Where the Thatcher government claimed to favour independence, this excluded independence of political messages that threatened its authority or credibility. *Blake's 7* echoes this tendency to an extent in Servalan, as will soon be discussed.

Blake's 7 was transmitted too early to be a fully-formed reflection of Thatcherism, which arguably did not come into its own until after the Falklands War in 1982, but the themes of Thatcherism were already emerging during its run. At least as early as 1975 the free market mentality that Thatcherism wholeheartedly embraced was beginning to take root in Britain. As Andy Beckett points out, "a shift in corporate culture … had begun well before Thatcher's election."[16] Similarly, Hall comments:

> We've been in the grasp of the Thatcherite project, not since 1983 or 1979, as official doctrine has it, but since 1975. … It doesn't begin with Mrs Thatcher's electoral victory, as politics is not a matter of elections alone. It lands in 1975, right in the middle of [previous Prime Minister] Mr Callaghan's political solar plexus.[17]

Sitting on the cusp of that shift, from fiscal conservatism to a more authoritarian society with fiscal liberalism, *Blake's 7* initially reverberates uneasily between the two poles: at first critiquing the shift, but then embracing it and its inherent individualism

in the second half of its run. Nonetheless, the series finally arrives at a point of criticism, finding this new individualistic society to be unsustainable.

Thatcher worked hard to replace the collective style of post-war consensus government with her more individualist approach that favoured personal independence against what she saw as an overbearing "nanny state." While the ending of *Blake's 7* seems to indicate complete futility, I will argue that it is specifically about the futility of individualism, and the inability of the individual, alone, to make any real change.

3. *BLAKE'S 7* AND THATCHERISM

Blake's 7 was created by Terry Nation, who was responsible for the Daleks in *Doctor Who*. Nation's running theme had always been the corruption of power, which hints at his wartime upbringing, especially in his acknowledged (if sometimes subconscious) invocation of the Nazis as models for the Daleks. Nation comments of his most famous creations:

> The Daleks are all of "Them" and they represent for so many people so many different things, but they all see them as government, as officialdom, as that unhearing, unthinking, blanked-out face of authority that will destroy you because it wants to destroy you. I believe in that now; I've directed them more in that way over the years.[18]

This disquiet about authority has given way to full-blown hatred in *Blake's 7*: the series is a darker addition to Nation's oeuvre, exploring more morally and politically-charged territory.

Some of the series' most politically radical content, however, had little to do with Nation, whose input diminished from season two onwards. It may be said that the series' primary creative force became the script editor Chris Boucher, whose "increased influence upon the show in its second season marked the programme's distinct turn towards the politically ambiguous."[19] Boucher comments:

> Terry had a much clearer notion of right and wrong than I did, and saw the series as basically Robin Hood in space. Whereas I sort of warped it a bit and tried to make it more ambiguous, so that in the end it became more like Che Guevara and *The Dirty Dozen*.[20]

Some of this tonal shift was due to practical considerations: Gareth Thomas, who played Blake, left at the end of season two, making way for the more Machiavellian Avon to take charge; Nation himself left soon after. Nonetheless, these changes also coincided with a more ambiguous political era.

In the first episode, "The Way Back" (1978), Earth has become a dystopia in which all citizens are anaesthetised on a regular basis. Roj Blake is introduced as a "regular" citizen, but he soon discovers that he has a rebel past—memories of which had been cleared from his mind by the Federation through the use of drugs and torture. At first, he does not believe those who try to convince him of his past, but eventually he learns that his life is a myth that has been constructed by the authorities. When Blake recovers from his drug-induced state and sees "behind the veil" to the reality of these authorities, he is motivated to become a revolutionary once again. This episode shows us a picture of wealth and privilege for the few, as long as they are prepared to accept the "mythical" structures of daily life.[21] The episode was broadcast one year before Thatcher was elected. It critiques the wealth divide and economic decline that were already present, but were to dramatically escalate in Thatcher's first term, when unemployment rose to over three million.[22]

Blake is incarcerated for his "crime" of once again colluding with rebels, while a false allegation of paedophilia is also brought against him. The lawyer who tries to defend him is killed, with a fabricated excuse offered about the cause of his death, indicating the absolute power of the Federation to control the narrative of its citizens. Blake is sent aboard a prison ship, bound for the prison planet Cygnus Alpha, and there he meets the group of assorted criminals who will eventually become his crew. Between them, they manage to escape the prison ship and hijack another ship christened by them as the *Liberator*.

Blake's 7 grows out of a tradition of British science fiction series like ATC's *UFO* (1970) and *Space: 1999* (1975–1977), which draw from American utopianism, as well as Terry Nation's darker *Survivors* (1975–1977) and Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass* serials (1953–1979). The influence of these series on *Blake's 7* is apparent, from its critiques of authority to its ruminations on the morality of duty and the use of violence. But *Blake's 7*, broadcast during the ever-growing authoritarianism of the Thatcher era, eventually moves beyond the archetypal structures of these antecedents, exploring Machiavellian behaviour and ambiguity in the presentation of its heroes and villains.

In the beginning, the characters do tend to fall into archetypal roles: Blake is the hero; Vila, the cowardly thief; Gan, the simple-minded strongman; and so on. Some of these archetypes are also found in Nation's earlier *Survivors*, but in *Survivors* there is no overbearing authoritarian power, only pockets of vigilantes. The protagonists are concerned with establishing a fair and just system, which may or may not involve authority. Conversely, in *Blake's 7* there are never any deliberations about the possible merits of governmental authority, only the desire to destroy the system. In the first two seasons there is something of a collectivist spirit amongst the crew, even if it is compromised by conflicting agendas. The rebels, led by Blake, eventually come close to destroying the Federation. But by the beginning of the third season, the ship's crew are dispersed and Blake is lost. A new crew is assembled with Blake's second-in-command, Avon, in charge. After this point, the crew consistently fails in their missions, as Avon more often steers them towards personal profit than revolution. The series then changes from a *Robin Hood*-inspired tale of revolutionaries, to a story of mercenaries attempting to live an existence of libertarian freedom—a form that finds fuller expression in Joss Whedon's series *Firefly* (2002), which itself shares many similarities with Blake's 7. A sense of left-leaning idealism is tempered by an emergent Thatcherite ideology, and the series oscillates in the centre of these tensions.

3.1 INDIVIDUALISM

Just as Thatcher famously claimed, "There is no such thing as society," so the characters in *Blake's 7* discover the limits of individualistic and Machiavellian

behaviour.[23] *Blake's 7* is a critique not of Thatcher's stated values, but of the society that was an inevitable result of those policies. Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite writes: "Thatcherites ... conceived of human nature as self-interested, but not entirely individualistic, for people were embedded in families and communities."[24] However, Thatcherism in practice often amounted to a more personal agenda of consumerism and wealth accumulation. Quart considers that Thatcherism's promotion of individualism lead to "the avaricious pursuit of personal profit as a moral virtue."[25] *Blake's 7* shows the inevitable side of the individualism that was a by-product of Thatcherism: the lone operator with no allegiances, fuelled by greed and self-interest, with perhaps some small degree of altruism. Because of the fate of Avon and the other crew members, its themes invoke a stridently anti-Thatcher message. Whether the Thatcherite agenda was about greed or not, the case for individualism became, in practice, more about personal enrichment than family or community. It is this conception of the individual that is eventually at the heart of *Blake's 7*.

Instead of the collectivist group dynamic found in most generic science fiction series that predate Thatcherism, *Blake's 7* moves from (the appearance of) collectivism to individualism. Even in the early stages there is little cohesion within the group. The crew settle into their roles on board the ship, but only reluctantly. Their only shared "value" is a mutual fear of capture and incarceration. Steven Duckworth notes:

> On paper, the premise of *Blake's 7* reads like a fairly traditional "rebels versus tyrants" fable, a sci-fi variation on the Robin Hood myth of a closely bonded gang of roguish heroes fighting for a noble cause. In actuality, the protagonists are anything but a team, flung together by forces beyond their control and remaining together for selfish reasons and despite significant personal animosities.[26]

Thatcherism's conception of individuals working in communities, bound together by self-regard, finds some parallel in the crew of the *Liberator*, although the scenario also shows that this self-regard causes more negative results than positive.

After season two, when Blake himself disappears, the series presents an evermore individualistic crew, combined by little more than their mutual need for evasion of the Federation. Though the group was never especially cohesive in the first instance, they at least had a common goal. In the new formulation, the crew appears to be far more self-serving and atomised, without Blake's (admittedly problematic) idealism to anchor them in their mission. Avon had always been a Machiavellian manipulator, but when he takes over as the new protagonist he proves himself ever more ruthless, operating largely on selfish individual motivation, although his ultimate goals are never clear. A Brechtian character, in the sense that his actions more often estrange than invite empathy, Avon's interests in rebellion, revolution and liberation appear to be slight, while his instinct for self-preservation is strong. If he does demonstrate a more humane or empathetic attitude, it is for ambiguous reasons. He often treats the rescue of others, for example, as a response to an arbitrary mood, as in "Star One" (1979), when he decides to fight off an invading fleet of aliens until the Federation arrives, because he gave Blake his word he would do so. Asked by Vila why he would give his word, Avon replies, "Why not?"[27] He may also treat mercy as an expression of mere expedience. In "Aftermath" (1980) when Dayna rescues him, he prevents her from killing his assailant, simply commenting that "he's no danger to us now."[28] Depending on how one reads particular scenes, Avon may conflate affection with steely pragmatism, as in "City at the Edge of the World" (1980), where he defends his crew member Vila by commenting, "He's irritating, but he's useful. We can easily replace a pilot, but a talented thief is rare."[29] However, on the whole Avon's attitude is more often ruthless and self-serving than altruistic.

In Avon, I argue, we witness a nascent Thatcherite ideology in emergence: individualism, shown in the rejection of "society"; Machiavellian behaviour; and the pursuit of personal wealth (if not its actual attainment). Again, the Thatcher government never stated a preference for Machiavellian behaviour, although it was an almost inevitable outgrowth of its individualist policies. *Blake's 7* plays on that outgrowth and presents Avon as a caricature of the "ideal" Thatcherite citizen. Avon's pursuit of wealth is often inflicted on other crew members, even in the early seasons.

In the episode "Gambit" (1979), the *Liberator* crew arrives at Freedom City. Blake's quest is to find a man who can assist them with finding the Federation's mainframe computer, but Avon and Vila decide to use Orac, the advanced AI unit aboard the ship, to cheat at the casino in the city—a plan that fails. In "Gold" (1981), the crew is recruited to steal gold from a transport ship. As always, the plan goes wrong. Any time the crew, or individuals within it, abandon their quest for revolution for the sake of personal gain, the results are disastrous.

Servalan, the eventual president of the Federation, is also a strong individualist. Like Avon, she is Machiavellian and ruthless: she keeps her ultimate plans to herself, only releasing parts of information when necessary. Sherryl Vint notes that Thatcherism led to a "crisis in masculinity in a British society encouraged to value aggressive and uncompromising individualism, just as traditional patriarchal authority and work were disappearing."[30] Servalan uses her svelte, feline sexuality to exploit the masculine system. In one sense, Servalan is the clearest comparison with Thatcher, as both are women at a time when women in power were even less common than at present and, while little has been written about Thatcherism and *Blake's 7*, this parallel has not been overlooked. Christine Cornea notes:

> The figure of Servalan as Federation leader legitimated female ambition, but only in the sense that she embodied a new economic agenda fuelled by amoral, aggressive competition and personal greed. Representative of Thatcher, the femme fatale characterisation of Servalan played out the "dangerous attractions" of this new economic agenda for the left-leaning male.[31]

Servalan marries sexuality with power, suggesting these "dangerous attractions." She is brutal, individualistic, and a "threat to the masculine order," but she also breaks out of the traditional binary structure. As Jonathan Bignell and Andrew O'Day observe, Servalan "refuses to fit within the traditional binary categorisation of women in relation to men and blurs the boundaries between those inherited binaries, mixing the category of femininity with masculinity and power"[32] Just as Avon presents a challenge

to the notion of a "heroic" archetype, Servalan complicates these traditional gender binaries because she is in power.

As the series develops, we witness a symbiotic relationship form between the crew and Servalan. This apparently permissive relationship offers an insight into a much more insidious form of authoritarian power. As discussed, the Thatcher regime strongly encouraged independence, as long as that independence was narrowly defined. The government, for example, attempted to interfere with the political messaging of media outlets, thereby illustrating the limits of this "freedom."[33] A similar relationship develops between the crew in *Blake's 7* and Servalan: she allows them to operate with the illusion of independence until it is no longer expedient for her to do so. She does this partly because they are a useful tool for her, but also because a degree of respect develops from the hunt, particularly between her and Avon.

The episode "Terminal" (1980) examines the connections between these two most individualistic characters, Servalan and Avon, and the porous boundaries between "hero" and "villain." Avon goes on a mission that he will not explain to the others: a quest to find Blake. But the "Blake" he encounters is a drug-induced hallucination, engineered by Servalan to lure him off the ship so that she can seize it. The episode is notable for its ambiguities. Avon's quest to find Blake may be driven by a need for a figurehead to lead the rebellion, or a personal need or it may simply be a drive for personal profit. Servalan's ruse involves the hallucinated Blake informing Avon that there is a "discovery" that will bring them wealth and power. When Avon encounters "Blake" (or the apparition), they have an exchange:

> BLAKE: It must've been so dull, having no-one to argue with.
>
> AVON: Well, there were times when your simple-minded certainties might've been refreshing.
>
> BLAKE: Careful Avon—your sentiment is showing.
>
> AVON: That's your imagination. Now, are you going to tell me about this discovery that is going to make us rich and invincible?[34]

Avon has risked everything, including his own life, for this "discovery," yet it is unclear why. Because of the obvious animosity between the two characters, Avon's desire to find Blake after season two is curious. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Avon's motivations are always ambiguous. Boucher himself acknowledges his ambiguity, claiming, "I was always careful to make sure that Avon could have an idealistic reason for doing something, and also a totally selfish and cynical one. … I don't think to my mind the character was really sure of his own motives anyway."[35] Though his motives are unclear, Avon is always, to some extent, mercenary in his behaviour.

In the two characters of Blake and Avon we may detect a contest between two ideologies: that of the "old guard," the leftist who believes in social justice; and the "new wave," the self-interested right-wing character. Avon was originally convicted by the Federation for trying to embezzle an enormous amount of money by hacking a computer. Already the associations are apparent—with traders in the City of London, or Wall Street in New York, the 1980s ushered in the era of the yuppie, some of the traits of which can be seen in Avon. Avon is doubly estranging: he is both a Brechtian character and an expression of Thatcherism at a time when this new system was still in its early stages. In contrast, Blake is more redolent of the "consensus" politics of the pre-Thatcher years.

Peter Wright discusses the way that conservative, Thatcherite politics came to bear on the contemporaneous *Sapphire & Steel* (1979-82), which addresses some of the same themes of individualism, independence and duty as *Blake's 7*. Wright sees the eponymous characters in *Sapphire & Steel*—extra-terrestrial detectives in stories that combine a mixture of science fiction and horror—as "heroic figures, despite their misanthropy," who celebrate "Margaret Thatcher's election as the triumph of conservative order over social chaos."[36] Sapphire and Steel clearly operate within a hierarchical system, which is one point of difference between the series and *Blake's 7*, but at the end of the series the "heroes" are betrayed by their own superiors. In the last story, when they realise they have been betrayed, Sapphire and Steel have an exchange:

STEEL: We're resented … they resent us … they resent our achievements.

> SAPPHIRE: More than that—they resent our independence.[37]

Thatcherism was full of this ambiguous promise of independence, which is echoed in *Blake's 7*. Just as Servalan allows the rebels to operate as long as it serves her interests, the characters in *Sapphire & Steel* are afforded the illusion of independence for as long as it serves their superiors, and no longer.

3.2 MORALITY, DUTY, AND THE QUESTION OF TERRORISM

Duckworth comments that *Blake's 7* "was shot through with moral ambiguities and uncertainties."[38] Some of these ambiguities manifest in the characters' approach to a traditional sense of duty. Blake's sense of duty is to the cause of revolution and he is comfortable with the notion that the ends justify the means. With his collectivist associations, Blake is therefore a warning against the emerging neoliberal society. But he is also a character trapped between two moral stances: that of his perceived duty to humanity, liberating people from the clutches of the Federation; and a revolutionary position that moves closer to zealotry. By the end of season two, the crew has achieved its objective. They have reached Star One, the Federation's mainframe computer. To destroy it is to significantly destabilise the Federation, perhaps even end its reign. For the first time, Blake's single-minded pursuit of this goal is challenged and critiqued within the series:

> CALLY: Are we fanatics?
>
> BLAKE: Does it matter?
>
> CALLY: Many, many people will die without Star One.
>
> BLAKE: I know.
>
> CALLY: Are you sure that what we're going to do is justified?
>
> BLAKE: It has to be. Don't you see, Cally? If we stop now then all we have done is senseless killing and destruction. Without purpose, without reason. We have to win. It's the only way I can be sure that I was right.[39]

Blake's reply is roughly utilitarian, using Jeremy Bentham's "fundamental axiom" that "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong."[40] By the end of the episode, it is revealed that an Andromedan invasion force is trying to destroy all of humanity. The crew decide that, in light of this, the cost of destroying Star One is too great, and they alert the Federation. Blake's idealism is nearly always on the side of revolution, but, at this stage at least, he realises the need for compromise.[41] Nonetheless, Blake's motivations and actions are, on the whole, close to fanaticism. Boucher comments:

> I saw Blake as an idealist who goes down the road that idealism, and fanaticism to an extent, takes people. Although he believed that he was working for a just cause and that his motives were purely altruistic, I can't see how Blake could possibly have avoided being brutalised to some extent, by the kind of guerrilla war that he was undertaking against the Federation. … To infer that the end justifies the means is, to my mind assuredly wrong, because I don't think there is an end, there are only means, and means are corrupting.[42]

Boucher is clear in where he sees Blake's revolutionary tendencies leading and, as the series goes on, Blake's humanity is eroded and turns into a battle-weary cynicism. By his last appearance in the final episode of the series, "Blake" (1981), he is shown to be physically and (to an extent) mentally deranged by his years of guerilla warfare. Even though he is still at the business of revolution, his idealism has all but disappeared.

In the example of "Star One," the series poses the question of whether the crew is comprised of freedom fighters or terrorists. Duckworth writes: "Blake and his followers seek to overturn the status-quo, but they do so by acts of terrorism and piracy in which civilian deaths are seen as little more than 'collateral damage.'"[43] Questions of what constitutes terrorism were arising at this time in Britain more urgently than before. Thatcher's confidante, the conservative minister Airey Neave, was assassinated by a car bomb in 1979, and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) took responsibility. In the same year Lord Mountbatten was killed by a bomb

that was also claimed by the INLA. These events deeply affected Thatcher's attitude towards terrorism, and she was   later quoted as saying that the ANC, Nelson Mandela's party in South Africa, was an organisation of terrorists. [44] Even before Thatcher was elected, the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the terrorist activities of the IRA in Ireland and Britain were commonplace. As Seaton notes, Thatcher was not pleased with the way the BBC had dealt with the Troubles and, when she became Prime Minister, her government decided "to change the constitutional arrangements around the Corporation, and then to ensure that the next chairman was perhaps closer to its view, and that the governors were more sympathetic to it politically over Northern Ireland."[45] *Blake's 7* deliberately calls into question the actions of the crew in defying authority by operating outside the law. McCormack writes that "*Blake's 7* scrutinises the response of government to terrorism and considers in what kind of society armed resistance becomes a logical activity."[46] In the above-cited exchange from the episode "Star One," Blake is challenged about whether he and his crew are "fanatics." The challenge, and Boucher's comment about the untenable assumption that the end justifies the means, suggests that the series is critical of what it calls "fanatical" behaviour, which, at the time of "Star One," amounts to terrorism. Yet, at the same time, Blake in particular is portrayed as a noble, heroic figure, even if those qualities are becoming obsolete. The series is, in the end, ambivalent about whether or not Blake and his crew are terrorists, yet it portrays their struggle against the system as noble, and at least questions whether terrorism is ever justified.

As we have seen, Avon has no discernible sense of duty. In the third episode, "Cygnus Alpha" (1978), we see the first hint of Avon's Machiavellian character when he and crewmate Jenna discover valuable jewels aboard the ship while Blake is on the surface of a prison planet. The two debate whether or not to leave Blake on the prison planet or teleport him back up to the ship:

JENNA: What about Blake?

AVON: What about him?

JENNA: No.

AVON: We could own our own planet.

JENNA: We're not leaving him there.

AVON: We have to. He's a crusader. He'll look upon this as just one more weapon to use against the Federation. And he can't win. You know he can't win.[47]

The most telling departure from most generic science fiction television series is that Avon is proven to be correct. In the long run, Blake cannot, and does not, win. This conversation, coming as it does relatively early on in the series, sets the tone for much of what follows. This crew is not a collection of "merry men": there is dissent from the beginning, which never dissipates. The audience is tempted to see Avon as the "villain" who might derail the crew, yet his Realpolitik arguments—that Blake cannot win, and the suggestion to exploit the situation by accumulating money—are reasonable. In an echo of Suvin, Avon offers both a concession to the emerging neoliberal mindset, and a stark warning against it.

Avon's cutthroat attitude appears constantly. As early as his first appearance in the series' second episode, "Space Fall" (1978), we are given examples of where the character sits:

VILA (*referring to Avon*): He came close to stealing five million credits out of the Federation banking system.

BLAKE: What went wrong?

AVON: I relied on other people.[48]

Soon after, Avon explains his attitude: "Wealth is the only reality, and the only way to attain wealth is to take it away from somebody else."[49] For Thatcherites, wealth is also the only reality that can lead to freedom, just as it is with Avon, even if Avon's version represents a more cynical aspect of wealth accumulation.

When Avon takes charge of the ship and its crew, it becomes apparent that his motives are far darker and more ambiguous than Blake's ever were. Although he appears to be part of the crew, it becomes clear that Avon has his own agenda, his own

interest in self-preservation, and will do anything, even kill other crew members, to achieve it. In "Terminal" he explains: "I don't need any of you. … I don't want you with me, I don't want you following me. Understand this: anyone who does follow me, I'll kill them."[50] In the episode "Orbit" (1981), Avon and Vila find themselves trapped in a ship that cannot quite break the atmosphere of the planet on which they are caught. In order to escape, they need to jettison 73kg of weight from the ship. Orac (an advanced AI computer) informs Avon that this happens to be the exact weight of his crewmate Vila. Avon pulls out his gun and shrieks his name, although Vila has by now taken the initiative to hide.[51]

3.3 FINAL EPISODES

After quests for more wealth, the last two episodes before the series finale see a change of heart for the crew. In "Warlord" (1981), Avon rediscovers his revolutionary streak and attempts to assemble a new rebellion, only being thwarted because of internal politics. Then, in the final episode, "Blake" (1981), Avon—presumably driven by the quest for rebellion—discovers where Blake may be. This time, his mission leads to success (in the sense that they locate Blake), but also ultimately to the crew's demise. The crew travels to the planet Gauda Prime, where Blake is attempting to assemble a new team of resistance fighters. However, as a cover, he pretends to be working as a bounty hunter for the Federation and "captures" Avon's crewmate Tarrant. At the same time, Avon and the others find their way to Blake's new base, where Tarrant, escaped from his phony confinement, warns them that Blake has "sold us … all of us."[52] Avon is unable to process this information and shoots Blake, apparently out of his feelings of betrayal, asking, "Have you betrayed us, Blake? Have you betrayed me?"[53] The Federation troopers storm in soon after and kill all the crew-members, with only Avon left alive. Troopers surround him, echoing the disturbing images of the riots in England during that same year. He slowly lifts his weapon, looks at the camera and smiles. The screen cuts to black, with the sound of gunshots.

One way to read the final episode of *Blake's 7* is to cede to the notion of complete futility. Another is to interpret the ending as ultimately redemptive. Bignell and O'Day pose this version:

the efforts of Blake and his crew to overthrow the system in favour of a more humane and democratic one can seem like futile and insignificant blows against it. Nevertheless, the values of the British (or more accurately English) middle class that these resistant and hopeful characters possess are attributed with potential to become the lynchpins of progress towards a more enlightened future.[54]

Perhaps there are, then, other rebel groups who will follow in the aftermath, leading to that "more enlightened future." Boucher, however, considers a darker and more cynical reading of the ending, which connects to Thatcherism. When asked about whether the crew could have ever won, he replied:

> No, I don't think it was possible. Although on occasion it was suggested that there were other freedom fighters about the place, they were never of any real threat to the Federation. So really when you came down to it, there was only Blake and his four companions, fighting alone and against overwhelming odds.[55]

This kind of admission points, on one level, to the futility of the fractured and defeated political left evident in Thatcher's Britain. Yet, on the other hand, Boucher also sees the failure of the rebels as a failure of the individual. If the rebels had managed to assemble a larger rebellion, they may have had a chance. This suggests that only a sufficiently large collective can succeed against corrupt power. The rebels in *Blake's 7* fail because they are a collection of individuals, united in neither philosophy nor motivation. The series is therefore a dark caricature of the kind of individualism championed by Thatcherism.

The characters in *Blake's 7* are never united in their "hopeful resistance" and are all fighting for their own personal reasons. Only Blake is truly interested in overthrowing the system, and his position is morally questionable. There is never any mention of a "more humane and democratic" alternative to the system; indeed, echoing Thatcher herself, there is never any alternative. Avon never embodies any attributes of hopefulness or humanity, and is mainly driven by his own selfish and

cynical goals, even if they are ambiguous and tempered somewhat by the occasional revolutionary streak. There is some temptation to read the series' ending as a cry for freedom against corrupt authority, even if one's life is taken in the process. Its message would then align with a more straightforward left-wing, revolutionary agenda: lay down one's life for the cause of freedom and equality. However, that is not how the ending plays out. Instead, Avon is characterised in a way that is too cynical for that kind of idealism. Blake, the idealist, is killed not by the Federation but by Avon himself. This would suggest that individualism has killed idealism. But individualism is not a viable alternative, as it leads to the destruction of all parties. The ending most clearly presents a critique of individualism: there is no chance for the lone operator, with their own personal motivations, to beat the system, or even, in many cases, to live in an equitable way within it. Only a unified front can achieve true revolution. The ending of *Blake's 7* is ultimately about the failure of the individual, and therefore critiques Thatcherism and its inherently individualistic policies and ideologies.

4. CONCLUSION

The characters in *Blake's 7* display an outright hatred of authority, matched with a strong sense of individualism and a morally complicated position. Blake and Avon appear at different times as the protagonists, and their moral positions are almost diametrically opposed. Blake is an idealist, while Avon is a cynical pragmatist, even if their attitudes do converge occasionally, and they display an ambiguous need for each other. Their opposing positions are in some ways reflections of Britain's changing political climate, from social-democratic principles and the consensus era, to Thatcherite neoliberalism, with its "conviction" politics and emphasis on individualism.

Blake champions a kind of reckless idealism, leading to fanaticism, and he is prepared to take his crew down that path. Avon's motivations, however, are much more ambiguous. At some times he pursues personal gains; at others, he fights for his companions. His search for Blake in the final two seasons appears to be both for personal gain and for the cause of revolution at the same time. Indeed, Boucher

himself believed that there was no clear line of motivation for Avon. Yet Avon's connection to the culture that built up around Thatcherism is clearer: he is often driven by a ruthless, Machiavellian pursuit of profit and personal gain.

Blake's 7 encompasses both left- and right-wing values. It is left-wing in its revolutionary, anti-authority stance, but when Blake leaves the series this is supplanted by Avon's right-wing characteristics, which align more closely with Thatcherism. In the end, the series becomes a critique of the emerging right-wing world of Thatcherism and its inherent individualism. The series suggests that revolution cannot succeed without sufficient numbers and a collective spirit. The crew in *Blake's 7* constantly fail when they behave as individualists, ultimately leading to their demise.

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NOTES

[1] There are many works that discuss the difference between dystopia and anti-utopia. One definition that guides me here is Darko Suvin: "Anti-Utopia is … explicitly designed to refute a currently proposed eutopia. It is a pretended eutopia—a community whose hegemonic principles pretend to its being more perfectly organized than any thinkable alternative, while our representative "camera eye" and value-monger finds out it is significantly less perfect than an alternative, a polemic nightmare." The "simple" dystopia (so called to avoid inventing yet another prefix to "topia") is a straightforward dystopia, that is, one which is not also an anti-utopia. *Blake's 7* shows signs of both anti-utopia, chiefly in its first episode, and pure dystopia. On Suvin's account, this would overall be technically an anti-utopia, since a "simple" dystopia

shows no signs of anti-utopianism. See: Darko Suvin, *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010): 384.

[2] Una McCormack, "Resist the Host: *Blake's 7*—A Very British Future," in *British Science Fiction Television: A Hitchhiker's Guide*, ed. J. R. Cook and P. Wright (London: IB Tauris Publishers, 2006), 174–179.

[3] Machiavellianism describes a ruthless attitude of coercion and subterfuge. Named after the 16th century politician Niccolò Machiavelli, whose book *The Prince* (1513) describes his political strategies, Machiavellianism is used in this article, as described by Jones and Paulhus, as a term "to capture a duplicitous interpersonal style assumed to emerge from a broader network of cynical beliefs and pragmatic morality." Daniel N. Jones and Delroy L. Paulhus, "Machiavellianism," in *Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behaviour*, ed. M. R. Leary and R. H. Hoyle (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 93.

[4] As Fredric Jameson notes: "What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available." Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), xii.

[5] McCormack, "Resist the Host," 178.

[6] The "winter of discontent" in Britain of 1978–1979, arose from the then-Labour Government's attempts to control inflation with pay caps. This lead to union strike action and blackouts, causing the coldest winter in 16 years.

[7] McCormack, "Resist the Host," 178.

[8] Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 254.

[9] Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 36.

[10] Suvin, *Defined by a Hollow*, 2.

[11] Phillip E. Wegner, "Preface: Emerging from the Flood in Which We Are Sinking: Or, Reading with Darko Suvin (Again)," in *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology*, by Darko Suvin (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), xiii.

[12] Suvin, *Defined by a Hollow*, 11.

[13] Margaret Thatcher, "TV Interview for London Weekend Television *Weekend World* ('Victorian Values')," interview by Brian Walden, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, January 16,

1983, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105087. See also: Peter Jenkins, *Mrs Thatcher's Revolution: The Ending of the Socialist Era* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 67.

[14] Stuart Hall, "The Neoliberal Revolution," *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 6 (2011): 713.

[15] Greg Philo, "Television, Politics and the New Right," in *The Glasgow Media Group Reader, Vol. II: Industry, Economy, War and Politics*, ed. Greg Philo (London: Routledge, 1995), 205.

[16] Andy Beckett, *Promised You a Miracle: Why 1980-82 Made Modern Britain* (London: Penguin, 2015), 45.

[17] Stuart Hall, "Gramsci and Us," in *Antonio Gramsci: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 4: 238.

[18] Terry Nation, "Tel Tale," interview by John Peel, *In Vision*, no. 4 (1988): 3, https://archive.org/details/Doctor_Who_-_In-Vision_004_-_Genesis_of_the_Daleks.PDF.

[19] McCormack, "Resist the Host," 175.

[20] Chris Boucher, "Chris Boucher Interview," interview by Alan Stevens and Anthony Brown, *Kaldor City* (blog), 1992, http://www.kaldorcity.com/people/cbinterview_1992.html

[21] I am using the word "mythical" in the sense that Roland Barthes used it in his 1957 book *Mythologies*. The basic premise of *Mythologies* is that the bourgeois class use ideological positions to de-historicise the bourgeois view of reality and focus on a mythological "universality" of human nature. Wrenched from its historical position, everyday life becomes "mythical." Barthes writes of French society in the 1950s: "I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn." Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 10.

[22] Margaret Thatcher, "Radio Interview for BBC Radio 2 *Jimmy Young Programme*," *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, September 9, 1981,
https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104529.

[23] Margaret Thatcher, "Interview for Woman's Own ('No Such Thing as Society')," *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, September 23, 1987, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689.

[24] Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "Margaret Thatcher, Individualism and the Welfare State," *History & Policy*, April 15, 2013, http://www.historyandpolicy.org/opinion-articles/articles/margaret-thatcher-individualism-and-the-welfare-state.

[25] Leonard Quart, "The Religion of the Market: Thatcherite Politics and the British Film of the 1980s," in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester D. Friedman

(London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 17.

[26] Steven Duckworth, "*Blake's 7*," in *The Essential Cult TV Reader*, ed. David Lavery (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 55.

[27] *Blake's 7*, season 2, episode 13, "Star One," *Blake's 7*, directed by David Maloney, written by Chris Boucher, aired January 7, 1979, on BBC.

[28] *Blake's 7*, season 3, episode 1, "Aftermath," directed by Vere Lorrimer, written by Terry Nation, aired January 7, 1980, on BBC.

[29] *Blake's 7*, season 3, episode 6, "City at the Edge of the World," directed by Vere Lorrimer, written by Chris Boucher, aired February 11, 1980, on BBC.

[30] Sherryl Vint, "Visualizing the British Boom: British Science Fiction Film and Television," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 13, no. 2 (2013): 157.

[31] Christine Cornea, "British Science Fiction Television in the Discursive Context of Second Wave Feminism," *Genders Online Journal* 54 (2011): 27.

[32] Jonathan Bignell and Andrew O'Day, *Terry Nation* (Manchester University Press, 2004), 173.

[33] Jean Seaton, *"Pinkoes and Traitors": the BBC and the Nation, 1974–1987* (Profile Books, 2015), 41–49.

[34] *Blake's 7*, season 3, episode 13, "Terminal," directed by Mary Ridge, written by Terry Nation, aired March 31, 1980, on BBC.

[35] Boucher, "Chris Boucher Interview."

[36] Peter Wright, "Film and Television, 1960-1980," in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (London: Routledge), 98.

[37] *Sapphire & Steel*, season 4, episode 1, "Assignment 6: Part 4," directed by David Foster, written by Peter Hammond, aired August 19, 1982, on ITV.

[38] Duckworth, "*Blake's 7*," 52.

[39] *Blake's 7*, "Star One."

[40] Jeremy Bentham, "A Comment on the Commentaries and A Fragment on Government," in *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 393, quoted in J. H. Burns, "Happiness and Utility: Jeremy Bentham's Equation," *Utilitas* 17, no. 1 (2005): 46.

[41] McCormack, "Resist the Host," 184.

[42] Boucher, "Chris Boucher Interview."

[43] Duckworth, "*Blake's 7*," 55.

[44] At a press conference in 1987, Thatcher said: "When the ANC says that they will target British companies, this shows what a typical terrorist organisation it is. I fought terrorism all my life and if more people fought it, and we were all more successful, we should not have it and I hope that everyone in this hall will think it is right to go on fighting terrorism. They will if they believe in democracy." Margaret Thatcher, "Press Conference at Vancouver Commonwealth Summit," *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, October 17, 1987, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106948.

[45] Seaton, *Pinkoes and Traitors*, 70.

[46] McCormack, "Resist the Host," 179.

[47] *Blake's 7*, season 1, episode 3, "Cygnus Alpha," directed by Verne Lorrimer, written by Terry Nation, aired January 16, 1978, on BBC.

[48] *Blake's 7*, season 1, episode 2, "Space Fall," *Blake's 7*, directed by Pennant Roberts, written by Terry Nation, aired January 9, 1978, on BBC.

[49] *Blake's 7*, "Space Fall."

[50] *Blake's 7*, "Terminal."

[51] *Blake's 7*, season 4, episode 11, "Orbit," directed by Brian Lighthill, written by Robert Holmes, aired October 12, 1981, on BBC.

[52] *Blake's 7*, season 4, episode 13, "Blake," directed by Mary Ridge, written by Chris Boucher, aired December 21, 1981, on BBC.

[53] *Blake's 7*, "Blake."

[54] Bignell and O'Day, *Terry Nation*, 177.

[55] Boucher, "Chris Boucher Interview."