

Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes



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Back From the Future: Shifting Time-Planes in *Life on Mars*

Richard Kilborn

The British TV drama series *Life on Mars* (BBC, 2006/7¹) has generally been seen as a groundbreaking and innovative piece of work that deserves to be ranked alongside other highly regarded series such as *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* and *The Wire*. Some observers have even credited it with having a revitalising impact on the wider crime drama tradition (Downey, 2007; Cook and Irwin, 2012). Like many series that later acquire cult-viewing status, however, *Life on Mars* did not initially find favour with TV drama commissioning editors. In fact, it took more than eight years for the show's creators (Kudos Films) to get the series on air in the UK. This in itself may give some indication of how, in an increasingly risk-averse broadcasting climate, there is considerable resistance to funding a drama that does not fall in line with what are considered to be the traditional parameters for mainstream TV drama.

Any fears that commissioning editors and broadcasters may have had about how *Life on Mars* would be received were dispelled, however, when the series made its debut on BBC One in January 2006. The series was not only an unqualified ratings success; it was also generally very well received by television reviewers and by other cultural commentators. Although some observers expressed doubt as to whether the central narrative conceit, that of a time-travelling detective, could be sustained over one or more series, most critics were full of praise. One reviewer wrote, for instance: "*Life on Mars* is a genuinely innovative and imaginative take on an old genre" (Graham, 2006), whilst others lauded the quality of the writing, the manner in which the central characters are drawn and the way in which the unfolding narrative successfully combined comic and more serious narrative elements. (Wollaston, 2006; O'Brien, 2006)

1 DVD and Blu-Ray recordings of *Life on Mars* (Series 1: BBC, 2006 and Series 2: BBC, 2007) are available for purchase from the usual distribution and retail outlets.

Life on Mars is built on the following dramatic premise. Sam Tyler is a modern-day detective with the rank of Detective Chief Inspector working in the Greater Manchester police department. The event that provides the narrative point-of-departure for the whole series occurs when Sam is attempting to track down a dangerous serial killer. At this point in the story, additional dramatic suspense is injected, when Sam learns that his girlfriend Maya has been snatched by the selfsame killer. Desperately attempting to rescue his girlfriend from the clutches of the evildoer, Sam gets hit by a car. When Sam wakes up after his accident, he finds that he has been catapulted backwards in time to the early 1970s. He is still a serving police officer, though no longer holding the rank of DCI. It is a rude awakening to say the least, since the police force to which he finds he has been temporarily transferred is in many ways the antithesis of the world to which he had become accustomed to living in before his accident.

Being pitched from a present-day environment into an altogether different temporal or spatial world is, of course, a narrative device that has been used to good effect by many writers and dramatists over the years. Sam's temporal and locational transposition has certain echoes of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, where Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find that he has been transformed into a monstrous bug. A similar kind of transformation occurs at the beginning of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* story, when the eponymous heroine accidentally falls down a rabbit hole and finds herself transported into a world that, to put it mildly, is more than passing strange.

As far as the basic plot set-up is concerned, *Life on Mars* is also similar to those narratives in classic Westerns where a mysterious stranger rides into town and proceeds to disrupt the status quo in ways that many of the townsfolk find distinctly threatening. Such scenarios provide plentiful opportunities for dramatic conflict but also for the forging of some unlikely alliances. It could be claimed that *Life on Mars* carries a number of echoes of classic Western plots, not least in the way that one of the main characters, DCI Gene Hunt, bears more than just a passing resemblance to the type of gun-toting lawman who thinks nothing of using the most unscrupulous means to ensure that justice is done.

Seen within the wider context of contemporary British and American TV drama, *Life on Mars* belongs to a fast-expanding corpus of work where a central concern is that of time-travel, or where one or more of the central characters are involved in inter-planetary or inter-galactic space-travel.

One of the best known of these is the British *Doctor Who* series, in which the eponymous Doctor, a highly eccentric but still rather lovable Time Lord, embarks on a series of adventures travelling through time and space in his personal time machine. More recently, however, there has been a spate of similar dramas that have involved characters being projected backwards or forwards in time or moved through different modes or states of consciousness. *Flashforward* (Channel 5, 2009), for instance, is about an unexplained phenomenon that causes everyone in the world to black out for 137 seconds and be granted visions of their future lives. Likewise, the recent BBC series *Paradox* (BBC One, 2009) centres on a similar unexplained phenomenon that causes an astrophysicist's computer to receive images from space of events 18 hours in the future. Time-shifting, visitations from the past and the future as well as characters being shuttled between different time domains are fast becoming a standard feature of certain types of TV drama.

In terms of the narrative strategies that it employs, *Life on Mars* still fulfils many of the requirements of a conventional detective series. Each episode focuses on a single crime case which Gene and his team are required to solve. Considerable humour is generated from the fact that the team of detectives that Sam has joined are, almost without exception, such a hapless group of individuals that it is sometimes difficult to believe they will be capable of solving any crime. Their faltering attempts frequently resemble the antics of a group of Keystone Kops. Sam, as the archetypal outsider, is almost always at variance with his colleagues when it comes to deciding on how a new crime case should be tackled. He is forever pleading with them, for instance, that it is essential that a crime scene be preserved and that correct procedures be followed.

Sam's superior knowledge of forensics and his familiarity with other scientific methods of investigation are clearly related to the fact that he is a temporal interloper from the future, the selfsame future (the year 2006) in which the first *Life on Mars* series was broadcast. Further reminders of Sam's locational origins are provided by references to Sam being on temporary transfer from Hyde. In the course of the two series of *Life on Mars*, Hyde provides the scriptwriters with a convenient shorthand way of referring to the place that Sam has had to abandon following his accident, without them having to be any more precise about the location. At the same time, 'Hyde' attains quasi-symbolic status in pointing to a world where more civilised values prevail, but where there still may be much that is hidden from view. Finally, through the particular connotations of

'Jekyll and Hyde', there is a suggestion that the nature of torment that Sam is experiencing may be rooted in some deep psychological trauma brought about by his accident.

Much of the appeal of *Life on Mars* is arguably bound up with the drama's basic fish-out-of-water premise. Catapulted back into the 1970s, Sam is confronted by a world that is seemingly light years removed from the one from which he has become temporarily (and temporally) detached. Once or twice Sam even makes reference to the fact that it feels as if he is living on a different planet. This is a world where rough-and-ready methods of policing prevail and where sexism, chauvinism and homophobia are rampant. But even as Sam sets about the challenging task of coming to terms with his new-found environment, viewers of a certain age will quickly recognise that this is all-too-familiar territory. It is a world they remember primarily through the fast-paced police dramas of the 1970s such as *The Sweeney*, the series that in many ways acts as a constant historical reference point for *Life on Mars*.

Just as in many other time-travelling tales, so too in *Life on Mars*, considerable narrative interest is focused on whether, and, if yes, how, Sam will be able to negotiate a return to the place from whence he has come. As the opening episode makes clear, Sam's projection into an altered state of consciousness, his enforced shift to an earlier time-zone or possibly his descent into madness has been triggered by a near-fatal, real-world car accident. Following the accident, Sam had been placed on a life-support machine to which – or so the *Life on Mars* scriptwriting team would have us believe – Sam remains attached for the duration of the 16 episodes of the drama. In order to provide viewers (especially those who tune in halfway through the series) with the basic information about Sam's temporal dislocation, each hour-long episode includes a brief segment – usually in the first two or three minutes of the episode – in which Sam helpfully reminds viewers of how he came to be where he is. The images of the accident are accompanied by Sam's voiceover comments: "*I had an accident and I woke up in 1973. Am I mad, in a coma, or back in time?*"

The basic narrative proposition of *Life on Mars* is that the protagonist's life is literally hanging by a thread, and that one of the series' overall objectives will be to devise some way of repatriating him by allowing him to escape from the limbo-world to which he has been consigned. Throughout the series the narrative is consistently punctuated by reminders of Sam's displaced person status. Each episode includes sequences that have

a certain formal affinity with flashbacks or flash-forwards in other types of dramatic fiction. It is via these sequences that the viewer's attention is drawn to Sam's allegedly comatose state and to the various attempts on the part of the world to which he rightfully belongs to keep in touch with him. These incursions from the present-day (2006) world frequently take the form of communications from his nearest and dearest or from the surgeons who are fighting to save his life. Various narrative devices are used to trigger or cue these moments where Sam receives often-troubling messages from those who are trying to reconnect with him. Once, for instance, innocently answering a police-station phone, Sam finds that the voice on the line is that of his mother. Likewise, as he tunes in to a 1970s TV programme in his tiny new bedsit, he is amazed to discover that the Open University lecturer presenting the programme has suddenly metamorphosed into a key member of his surgical team.

Though this interpenetration of past and present [time-planes] becomes a regular feature of the *Life on Mars* text, it never achieves the centrality it might have done in a more experimental piece of drama. Nevertheless, the porosity between past and present time-planes still acquires sufficient narrative prominence to enable it to become part of the *Life on Mars* viewer's 'horizon of expectations'. It is almost as if the audience is being encouraged to indulge in some second-guessing as to the point in each episode at which there will be some incursion from beyond the domain of the immediately foregrounded events.

It is in this way that viewers become routinely accustomed to looking out for telltale clues as to when Sam is going to be privy to such communications. As a result, one of the pleasures of watching *Life on Mars* is being able to share with Sam those moments when he seems, both literally and metaphorically, to have a foot in both camps. Take, for instance, episode 6 of the first series, in which Sam and Hunt are taken hostage along with a number of others who are already being held by the hostage-taker. The scriptwriters have structured the narrative in such a way as to make the deadline of 2 pm set by the hostage-taker coincide exactly with the time at which doctors in another time and place (the world of 2006) will switch off his life support machine. Considerable dramatic tension is generated by playing off these two suspenseful situations, one against the other. A special poignancy is added to the mounting tension in the narrative by 'arranging' for the news of the family's decision to switch off his life support machine to be communicated to Sam by his mother.

Part of the general appeal of the *Life on Mars* is that viewers are always being encouraged to speculate as to how exactly the world of the future will impinge on events being played out in the 1973 storyline. For instance, given that Sam has been catapulted backwards in time, the audience is well aware that he is in possession of the kind of knowledge that he can profitably exploit in his new surroundings. There are several occasions in both series of *Life on Mars* where Sam is placed in situations where he has to decide whether he is justified in making use of the superior knowledge he has acquired. Often this is turned to comic effect, such in the episode from series 1 where Sam participates in a Grand National sweepstake organised by his colleagues, knowing full well the name of the winning horse. On other occasions Sam's knowledge of the future allows the scriptwriters to pose quasi-philosophical questions, such as what expectations we should have of someone who has been backward-projected in time. Should that person be expected to act in such a way as to attempt to forestall a potentially catastrophic event? Or are we, as viewers, simply being asked to consider the general proposition that one can always gain new historical insights by carefully reconsidering how a particular chain of events was set in train?

What arguably accounts for the major success of *Life on Mars* is that the scriptwriters have made such clever use of the displacement conceit that lies at the heart of this drama. The cleverness also extends to the way in which early 21st-century viewers are encouraged to identify or align themselves with the central character. Sam is presented to us as a representative of the modern, allegedly more civilised (2006) age who, by an unfortunate turn of events, is forced to confront a world which in many ways seems diametrically opposed to the one from which the plot demands of *Life on Mars* have required him to be jettisoned. Nowhere is this culture clash more clearly manifested than in the 'chalk and cheese' contrast between the two major protagonists of *Life on Mars*, Sam and Gene. Although the scriptwriters allegedly did not originally plan that Gene would have such the pivotal role in the drama, they quickly came to recognise that the juxtaposition of these two characters could be productively exploited in narrative terms. Much hinges on the fact that Sam and Gene have such startlingly different attitudes to how police officers should comport themselves. Whereas Sam has a desire to "do everything by the book", the swashbuckling Gene apparently has little time either for formal procedures or for the principle that a suspect is innocent till proved guilty. Chauvinistic and domineering, Hunt thinks nothing of extracting information or confessions by bullyboy tactics and violent means.

Another reason for the success of *Life on Mars* is in the way in which it combines elements of social satire with a gentler, more nostalgic view of the past. Thus, though the drama takes regular critical sideswipes at the institutional racism, the incidents of police corruption and the widespread homophobia that were prevalent in the early 1970s, the text stops short of a more thoroughgoing satirical demolition. Any social critique is more than offset by a strong wave of nostalgia, as *Life on Mars* takes its viewers back on an extended trip down memory lane. The defining sights and sounds of those times are consistently re-invoked, and the whole *Life on Mars* text teems with cultural references to the 1970s, whether these be iconic makes of car or the predominant fashions and hairstyles of the day. Keying in to viewers' memories in this way involves the use of both visual and aural imagery, but, as is so often the case with nostalgia, it is through the music of the time – especially such epoch-making songs as David Bowie's *Life on Mars* – that viewers are most powerfully and poignantly reminded of the hold that the past still has over us. There can be no doubt that, for many viewers, one of the particular pleasures of watching *Life on Mars* is that of being constantly reconnected with the special vibrancy of that period, though the very act of being reminded also brings a recognition of just how radically the world has changed in three short decades.

Whilst *Life on Mars* contains its fair share of nostalgic elements, it avoids any cloying sentimentalism. By revealing some of the widespread racism and corruption of the time, it might be claimed rather that *Life on Mars* provides a perspective on the past that encourages the audience to take a more socially critical view of those times. If the series might be regarded as providing such an even-handed and critical view, it could also be argued that the text encourages the reader to take an equally critical stance vis-à-vis certain features of the contemporary (2006) world. What Sam Tyler learns from his back-from-the-future experience, for instance, is that, whilst technological and scientific advances have transformed the manner in which modern police investigations are conducted, an over-dependence on forensically-based modes of detection may not in itself be enough to guarantee that villains are brought to book. As Sam learns in the course of the time he spends with Gene and his team, sometimes the methods and techniques that have stood detectives in good stead over the generations can still be surprisingly effective. Shrewdness, a good nose for what motivates the criminally inclined and a readiness to follow up a hunch are qualities that can also prove useful when attempting to solve 21st-century crimes.²

Whilst *Life on Mars* is acknowledged to have put a new spin on the police TV drama tradition, it is still heavily reliant on some of the more traditional features of this time-honoured genre. Most *Life on Mars* episodes follow the standard narrative trajectory of a conventional crime story, and there is also a degree of character stereotyping. Most striking of all in terms of genre conformity, perhaps, is the relationship between Sam and Gene. Though both men find themselves working together as a result of a chain of events that frankly beggars belief, they quickly begin to develop a buddy-like partnership where each becomes aware of the other's strengths. Their partnership is, nevertheless, still marked by some of the same features that characterise other detective duos. Although initially disinclined to put any trust in what he regards as dubious, new-fangled approaches to policing, Gene becomes increasingly reliant on his new colleague. By the same token, Sam, though still manifestly appalled by Gene's overt sexism and his general uncouthness, also sometimes has to reluctantly admit that Gene has a curious knack of getting results. In other words, as the drama unfolds, each man begins to treat the other with a certain grudging respect.

The special nature of their relationship comes particularly to the fore when one of them gets embroiled in a situation of mortal danger. Almost invariably, it is the timely interventions of the other that prevent the situation from taking a fatal turn. Perhaps the most memorable example of this comes in the penultimate episode of the second series of *Life on Mars*, in which Gene is arrested on a murder charge. Prospects look extremely bleak for him, since all the evidence points to him having been the perpetrator. Desperate to prove his innocence and to collect evidence that will help track down the actual killer, it is to his friend Sam that Gene turns in his hour of dire need. It is only through their combined efforts that the two men are able, ultimately, to prove Gene's innocence.

All in all, *Life on Mars* displays considerable ingenuity in the way that it sustains the initial time-travelling conceit and in the way that it manages its relationship with members of the TV audience. The individual crime stories that form the basis of each episode are competently told and fall in line with standard expectations of an hour-long crime story. On each occasion, an appropriate sense of narrative closure is achieved, with villains being arrested and crimes being solved. With respect to the series' overall narrative design, however, especially concerning how or whether

in such a way in *Life on Mars* that the text produces a discourse of progress that legitimises 21st-century approaches to policing.

the hero, Sam, will ever succeed in getting back to where he came from, the creators of *Life on Mars* have deliberately opted for greater openness. There is a suggestion in the final episode that time-émigré Sam, in a final daring and desperate act, has indeed contrived to negotiate his return to the contemporary (2006/7) world. The ending is handled in such a way, however, as to leave viewers with the feeling that certain mysteries about Sam's condition remain. Were the experiences that Sam went through after his accident simply the fevered hallucinations of a man in a coma? Or, as Sam suggests in the final episode, were these experiences in some way connected with traumatic events in his childhood, which he is now having to come to terms with. Or even more tantalisingly: was all this part of a near-death experience which, as we are reliably informed, can result in a person who is about to depart from this life enjoying almost total recall of all that has befallen them to date?

For a series broadcast on a mainstream channel targeting a prime-time audience, *Life on Mars* shows considerable narrative sophistication and occasional postmodernist playfulness. The time-travelling aspect may not attain quite the same significance as it does in series such as *Doctor Who* (BBC One, 1963-89, 2005-present) or *Terra Nova* (Fox TV, 2011). Nevertheless, the series as a whole is still sufficiently multi-faceted to ensure that it can claim to have a qualitative edge over more run-of-the-mill police dramas. In the final analysis, then, the cult success of the drama may be attributable to the ways in which *Life on Mars* cleverly grafts thematic material connected with issues such as time-travelling, coma-induced hallucinations and false-memory syndrome onto a more conventional piece of drama that bears many of the traditional hallmarks of a police procedural series.

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