

## Television that told the future.

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It prefigured Sars, the deep-ecology movement, even the rise of Arthur Scargill. Johann Hari rediscovers **Survivors**, a gem of 1970s BBC drama

A drizzly airport in Beijing. A black-clad businessman strides on to a plane. His flu is a slight irritation, nothing more. He flies to New York. Or Amsterdam. Or Cairo. Within days, it doesn't matter. He was infected. A global panic. Several airports are forced into lockdown. It's a familiar story - except this is not the story of the Sars epidemic of 2003. It's the basis of a strange, narcotic little British TV series from the 1970s called **Survivors**.

And it goes further: the vast majority of the human population is culled in a global viral holocaust, engineered by a malign, unseen scientist and told from the Emmerdale-shaped perspective of rural England. The first episode - "The Fourth Horseman" - is hard to describe in words, because it is so tedious, odd, irresistible: televisual Mogadon with a hint of bad acid.

The plot is simple enough. A pampered housewife, Abby Grant, doesn't really notice the flu virus sweeping the countryside. A jab from the local doctor is all she needs, she concludes, as she hurries to collect her husband - eerily played by Peter Bowles, adding to the cosy Middle England mood - from the train station. Abby waits for six hours. No trains come - and then, finally, Bowles emerges. "It's outrageous! There was chaos in London," he fumes. "Six hours!" When the apocalypse comes, the English will complain that it disrupts the rail timetable.

Abby begins to worry about her son, Peter, who is at boarding school on the other side of the country. Bowles reassures her with a stiff whisky and a clipped certainty that everything will be back to normal tomorrow. And then Peter Bowles - star of *To the Manor Born* - is dead, and Abby is alone, on an island where 999 people in every 1,000 are swiftly and sweatily greeting death. Alone, she stashes a handful of photographs in a neat holdall, turns on the gas, lights a rag and watches her family home (the rotting Bowles included) burn. Abby sets off in search of her son and survival.

My friends and I have all become obsessed. We watched the new DVD - all 13 episodes - in a long, feverish week. The rhythm of 1970s TV seem so unusual now that they add to the sense that you are watching something wholly other: long, slow scenes; wordy dialogue; and elegiac tracking shots of an empty England.

On one level, the series belongs to a time when nuclear annihilation seemed not just possible but probable: a world of CND rallies and Richard Nixon's napalm. Terry Nation, the series' creator and also the man behind the Daleks and *Blake's 7*, said, in an interview in the *Radio Times* to plug the show's launch in 1975, that he was "in no doubt... that disaster - in whatever form - will come." Yet Nation's choice of a biological weapon - and the show's complete lack of explanation

for the attack - makes the concept behind **Survivors** oddly contemporary. The creators of 28 Days Later, last year's multiplex-buster, freely admitted that the Seventies show had been a major influence on them. The ideas required little updating.

One of the factors that make this new DVD a bizarre looking-glass - a prism through which the world is warped in unexpected ways - is the show's appalling class-politics. **Survivors** is, at heart, the story of how the English middle classes try to rebuild civilisation, and how the indolent rich and parasitical poor disrupt and disturb them. The show's villains are those who reject the self-righteous hard-work ethic voiced by Abby: a Welsh tramp called Pryce who turns out to be a thieving murderer, and a rich-bitch it-girl called Ann who leaves her lover to die when he is crippled and can no longer wait on her. The most jolting piece of 1970s snobbery, however, is the character of the trade-union leader Arthur Wormley.

Arthur - does it sound like another union-leader, by any chance? - has decided to restore order. The breakdown of political order - a return to what Abby identifies as "feudal England, with barons running their own little fiefdoms through force of arms" - has left a vacuum. Wormley has appointed himself in charge, seized the scattered resources that remain and formed a band to execute anybody who disregards the orders of his "provisional government". The clash between an authoritarian union-leader and Abby, an aggressive right-wing woman, forms the spine to the series.

At a moment when Britain was more polarised than at any time since the 1926 general strike, when talk of the country's "ungovernability" was rife, **Survivors** simply took that fragmentation to an extreme: a new English civil war, staged in the wreckage of industrial civilisation. **Survivors** is not simply the story of the culling of the human race; it is the story of 1970s and 1980s Britain, written a decade before the miners' strike.

There is an even more interesting political strand to the show. Written at a time when environmentalist ideas were first trickling into the mainstream, **Survivors** can be read as a fable for the deep-ecology movement. Abby forms a community, with other **survivors**, dedicated to growing grain and achieving subsistence. "We are so dependent on complex support systems that we are less capable, less practical than Iron Age man," one character complains. Modern life has softened us up so much that we cannot possibly survive once the vast, dense safety net of industrial civilisation is ripped away, the characters lament. It is clearly implied that Abby and her community's reconnection with nature is a return to spiritual health. Go back to hoeing the earth: it's so much healthier - purer - than urban living, Nature seems to be saying.

The most hard-core strand of the environmentalist movement - a movement which was just emerging at the time **Survivors** was written - argues that we must prioritise the planet over mere humanity. It is only "species-ism" that makes us place what is good for us over what is good for "Gaia" (Earth, seen as a single, living organism). In the interests of Gaia, it may be that a large chunk of humanity must perish. As Marc McDonough - an activist with the leading deep-ecology campaign group Earth First! - explains: "If I had to choose between a world of happy humans with no rainforests, and a world of happy rainforests with no humans, I'd choose the latter without any hesitation."

**Survivors** is a deep-ecologist's dream come true. A central character called Jimmy Garland (played by Richard Heffer) explains their philosophy clearly at regular intervals throughout the show. Garland has reverted to living in the woods, where he has finally found peace, away from humanity. (The deep-ecologist Professor John Gray calls this humanity "homo rapiens", as

though we were rapacious cockroaches infesting and devouring the earth). Garland tells Abby: "The world's a marvellous place. It always was. It was the people who turned it sour." Thank God, he implies, they're gone.

Such misanthropy hangs over the series: every character considers escaping the community to be alone in the countryside at one point or another. The cities quickly become infected cesspits, and vegetation begins to take over once again: to Nation, that clearly looked like victory. Just as Dr Astrov in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* is the first person in mainstream fiction to argue for the preservation of nature against industrialisation - the first environmentalist - it may be that Garland is mainstream fiction's first deep-ecologist. **Survivors**, this intense, fetid TV series rescued from the BBC archives after 26 years, hangs in the room long after the end credits, like smoke from a poisoned cigar.

**'Survivors'** is released on DVD by DD Video (four discs; £49.99).