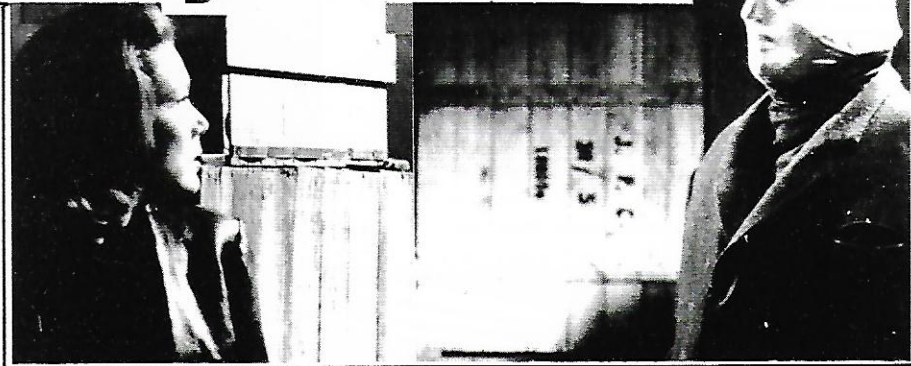


The Cybernauts ^{by Dave Tanner}



Nearly every long-running film/tv series has taken delight in creating an arch Nemesis for its heroes. Sherlock Holmes had Professor Moriarty - who, rather like the Cybernauts themselves, seemed somewhat reluctant to stay dead! BBC's long-running science fiction show, DOCTOR WHO, pits the dreaded 'Master' against the good Doctor, while the heroes of the intergalactic film saga, STAR WARS, faced the dark-shrouded figure of 'Darth Vader'. THE AVENGERS meanwhile, had John Steed and his sensuous cohorts pitted against a whole race of arch villains under the control (on three separate occasions) of, crippled scientist Dr. Armstrong, his vengeful brother, Paul Berresford and deadly double-agent Felix Kane.

The Cybernauts first appearance was in the 1965 Avengers tale "The Cybernauts" (surprise, surprise)! These seven-foot tall robots were the brain children of prolific Avengers scribe Philip Levene who, together with Brian Clemens would pen the majority of the Rigg colour stories, one of which was a sequel to the first Cybernauts story called (surprise, surprise) "Return Of the Cybernauts". According to Levene's first script, the creatures possessed the strength

of half-a-dozen men - though apparently not the brainpower (they preferred to smash down obstructive walls rather than use the door!)

Designed to reflect the increasing thriller aspect of The Avengers, rather than the fantasy element, these futuristic and lethal killers' bizarre-like appearance was enhanced by featureless black overcoats, dark trilby hats and sunglasses - giving a decidedly 'gangster-ish' feel to the whole proceedings.

In many ways, 'The Cybernauts' works better today than when it was first transmitted; afterall, to counteract the outrageousness of the 'Nauts themselves, many aspects of this tale border on the mundane nowadays - for instance, Armstrong's insistence that miniature televisions were 'on the way'.

Always a character harkening back to the days when chivalry was a common word, John Steed's attitude towards the promise of 'new' technology is best summed up during the first episodes 'tag' sequence. Here, Emma offers him a memento of their adventure in the form of an 'everlasting pen',

before tearing away in her ultra-fast, ultra-modern car, leaving our intrepid hero to settle back into the seat of his vintage Bentley and exclaim: "Never cared much for these new-fangled things!"

Despite not caring for his cybernetic foes and their galaxy of new technology, Steed, does of course, become inextricably involved and his investigations eventually lead him to United Automation and the crippled, embittered, wheelchair-bound, Dr Armstrong, creator of the Cybernauts, together with a host of new technology, including full automation for his wheelchair - technology that Steed turns to his advantage as the story wears on.



The key to the 'Nauts power is a ballpoint pen containing a complex homing beacon which leads the otherwise blind, docile and harmless robots to Armstrong's chosen victim. Blindness is their only weakness, however; bullets prove useless in stopping the seemingly invincible killers - as several unfortunate victims soon discover, until our hero finds another way to halt their deadly progress - by clipping a pen-beacon to a second Cybernaut in the story's conclusion. In the resulting confusion of steel hammering steel, the evil Armstrong is also dismissed, leaving Emma to topple the final 'Naut to the ground with the tip of her little finger - a visual joke that was too good to lose for director Robert Day repeated this ending (with a slight variation) in



"Return Of The Cybernauts".

On the design side, it is interesting to note that several varieties of Cybernauts were created for this story: one costume consisted of a lightweight metal face-mask (fashioned in an almost humorous parody of the human face with steel bolts at the side in homage to Frankenstein's monster), while the 'gangster-type' 'Naut was kitted out in the obligatory black suit and trilby and a third version (a 'mechanic') is seen wearing white overalls and a flat cap.

1967 ushered in a new era for The Avengers. The first colour episodes were transmitted (though this seemed rather pointless, as few viewers in the UK had colour sets until the mid-70's) and the first ever Avengers 'sequel' story was screened. Cybernaut masks and suits were recalled from ABC's warehouses, and Philip Levene was commissioned to bring back the cybernetic killers



once more in "The Return, Of The Cybernauts". (On reflection, the Cybernauts have always appeared during new and innovative era's of Avengers history: Diana Rigg's first season, the first colour series, and latterly, THE NEW AVENGERS.)

The plot of "Return" is interesting, (if reminiscent of the first story) and it depicts how Dr Armstrong's brother, Paul Berresford seeks revenge for his brother's death by kidnapping scientists who in turn are forced to turn the megalomaniac's mad dreams into reality. The dreaded robots make a powerful return in this story, and continue to show their deadly strength by exterminating several of the scientists and (almost) putting pay to a dotty dolly bird secretary.

The story also features several innovations to the Cybernaut saga: instead of using a pen as the 'beacon' for the 'Nauts to home in on, this time Berresford programmes the robots with the chosen victims cardiograph. Also utilized is a clip on watch containing mind-control equipment, with which Berresford attempts to control Steed - a similar device having already led Mrs Peel into Berresford's hands. (Naturally, Steed manages to switch the deadly device before he clips on the watch.) Also in parallel with the first story, is the way in which the Cybernauts are turned against Berresford.

The Cybernauts return (albeit briefly) in a second Rigg colour story, "Never, Never Say Die", where 'suspension of belief' is totally forgotten as Mrs Peel is shown watching a

clip from the first Cybernauts story on her television set before Steed's face appears to utter the immortal words: "Mrs Peel, we're needed!" (Curiously enough, this story is rather like a Cybernauts instalment, with a seemingly indestructible, computerised replica revealed as the villain of the piece).

As the 60's drew to a close, so did The Avengers, and it appeared that we'd seen the last of the death-whirling robots - but such was not the case for, barely seven



years later, THE NEW AVENGERS premiered on our screens and a story entitled "Last Of The Cybernauts ..?" heralded the return of the steel-lined robots ... and what a fascinating tale it was.

"Last Of", concerns the efforts of Felix Kane, an ex-double agent who, when forced to crash during a frantic dockyard car chase with Steed, Gambit and Purdey, is now disfigured and confined to a wheelchair. (Now where have I heard that one before?)

Swearing vengeance on the trio, Kane and his manservant abduct Frank Goff (one-time assistant of Professor Armstrong) and force him to lead them to an underground bunker where, secreted away in cellars, they find several of the deadly robots. Kane next sends a Cybernaut to abduct Professor Mason, a cybernetic specialist, who is then forced to formulate a system of cybernetic limbs for Kane whereby he becomes half human, half Cybernaut and, armed with this newly-found killing power, Kane sets out to locate (and destroy) The New Avengers. Needless to say, his plans are thwarted when Purdey and Gambit encounter a 'Naut who literally loses its head and, courtesy of Steed, Kane himself comes to a 'sticky' end.

The episode introduced some interesting refinements to the Cybernauts themselves: Their heads can now turn in a complete '360°

sweep', and their eyes now act as monitors to enable their operator to see exactly what the robot itself is seeing. (Goff describes these particular models as: "Mark III's - the most complex the old professor ever designed ... yet amazingly simple to control."

One interesting note: Six Cybernaut 'shells' were built for this episode, and only the three that Kane moves to the house required actors inside them! Costume-wise, the infamous black overcoats reappeared - this time complete with long woolen scarves!

However, this story, written by New Avengers writer and producer, Brian Clemens, contained a surprising script blunder. In this story, a certain Professor Domeil is named as the creator of the Cybernauts! (Professor who?!)

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