

ON DA-SEIN AND DOCTOR WHO

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Abstract

This paper revisits my previous publication *On the Future of Narrative* by addressing the concept of the future with regard to time-travel tropes and *Doctor Who* (2005–). It was previously demonstrated that the concept of the past is an uncharacteristically introduced theme within the concept of the future, the germ of which can be traced throughout the many adaptations of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, and derivatives thereof—including, but not limited to, the *TARDIS* (*Time And Relative Dimension In Space*) in *Doctor Who*. The characterisation of *The Doctor* as a *Time Lord*, however, blurs the lines between what is past, what is present, and what is future, by challenging the nature of a being in time in which being constitutes an extension, or expression, of this time in being in ways that recall Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Indeed, “If being is to be conceived in terms of time and if the various modes and derivatives of being, in their modifications, and derivations, and in fact to become intelligible through consideration of time,” according to Heidegger, “then being itself—and not only beings that are ‘intime’—is made visible in its ‘temporal {‘zeitlich’} character.” (p. 16). The very characterisation of this character, in turn, calls for a film philosophical interpretation of *Doctor Who*, as well as a careful re-examination of the relationship between being and time and the future of narrative as both the MacGuffin and *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

Keywords: being, Doctor Who, Da-sein, Heidegger, narrative, phenomenology, time

Doctor Who premiered on the 23rd of November, 1963, the day after then US President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. It ran continuously for a total of 26 seasons and 711 episodes, until it ceased production in 1989 due to a decline in viewership, and issues with production (Norrie). In 2005, however, the show was revived, and as of the 23rd of November, 2021, an additional 13 seasons and 153 episodes have been televised, with more scheduled for release and production in 2022. If one were to try and watch every episode back-to-back, assuming one could also find the highly coveted missing episodes from the first six seasons (Whitehead), it would take just over February to finish watching; suffice to say, *Doctor Who* is vast, and exceedingly so, even for a television programme. There is nothing quite like it in terms of serialisation, or syndication, either. It is not a sports broadcast, current affairs programme, religious show, or variety hour (“List of longest-running television shows by category”). It does not feature any of the same cast or crew from 1963, although some cast and crew members do make guest appearances from time to time¹. *Doctor Who* is unique, in that it is an ongoing narrative set in a fictional universe with a recurring protagonist, and that is quintessentially different from something just as old

¹ see special episode ‘The Day of the Doctor’ (2013).

as, say, *Star Trek* (1966–), which features an ensemble cast of characters who are not only prone to change from series to series, but from episode to episode.

Star Trek would appear to be, for all intents and purposes, a good standard of comparison, mostly because it is a science-fiction, too; but the television programme that *Doctor Who* actually shares the most in common with is something like *The Simpsons* (1989–), which has run continuously for a total of 33 seasons and 712 episodes, so far, and is scheduled to release its 750th episode in the Fall of 2022, or the Spring of 2023 (Goldberg; Swift). *The Simpsons* consists of the same family of characters, the eponymous *Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie, Simpson*, who live in the fictitious town of *Springfield*, and exist in a state of temporal, albeit narratological, flux that is referred to by some comic book artists and graphic novelists as a floating timeline, or a continuous present (Jeffery). The past, the present, and the future, in other words, overlap in ways that are both historical and contemporaneous, simultaneously. It is this notion of simultaneity, in particular, which allows *The Simpsons* to remain topical and relevant at the expense of its own continuity, especially when many of its characters do not seem to age in any meaningful way quite like they do in *Doctor Who*. In season four, episode 4², of *The Simpsons*, for example, *Homer*, the family patriarch, is purported to be 36 years of age, and yet, by season 18, episode 13³, nearly fifteen years later, *Homer* has only aged four years. The meanwhile caricatures of former US Presidents George H. W. Bush⁴, and Bill Clinton⁵, have come and gone since then, and all of this matters, and none of this matters, when it comes to *Homer's* children, *Maggie, Lisa, and Bart*, who should be almost twice as old as their father is young (Tyler). The eponymous *Doctor* of *Doctor Who*, by comparison, is approximately 900 years old⁶, the same character that premiered in 1963, that was revived in 2005, and that continues to be the subject of every episode thus far, just like the *Simpsons*. It also employs a floating timeline disguised as a time-travel trope, which blurs the lines between what is past, what is present, and what is future, by making the historical contemporaneous, and the contemporary historical, from episode to episode, from season, to season, to season.

Notwithstanding, *The Simpsons* depends on the format of its presentation as an animated sitcom in order to distort the passage of time through its use of caricature. If there is no observable change in the depiction of its characters, furthermore, then a false sense of continuity can be preserved from episode to episode until a change is enforced through this caricature, like the change of colour of *Waylon Smithers*⁷, or the canonical death of *Maude Flanders*⁸. Similarly, many of its episodes could be considered *status quo antes*, or self-contained vignettes, whereupon life returns to normal by the start of the next episode, or story, like *The Simpsons Halloween Specials*⁹. *Doctor Who* is a live action drama, though. Its narrative unfolds from episode to episode in a cumulative manner, while the depiction of its characters rely

² see season 4, episode 4, 'Lisa the Beauty Queen', (1992).

³ see season 18, episode 13, 'Springfield Up' (2007).

⁴ see season 7, episode 13, 'Two Bad Neighbors' (1996).

⁵ see season 4, episode 15, 'I Love Lisa' (1993).

⁶ according to Russel T. Davies' canonical short story, *Doctor Who and the Time War* (2013).

⁷ see season 1, episode 3, 'Homer's Odyssey' (1990), and episode 4, 'There's No Disgrace Like Home' (1990).

⁸ see season 11, episode 14, 'Alone Again, Natura-Diddily' (2000).

⁹ see season 2, episode 3, 'Treehouse of Horror' (1990).

on the reprisal of certain actors in key roles, like Jon Pertwee (1970–1974) as the third incarnation of *The Doctor*. If Pertwee was not available for some reason, or, in the case of Marcia Wallace as the voice of *Edna Krabappel*¹⁰ in *The Simpsons*, were to all of a sudden die, then *Doctor Who*'s sense of continuity would have been disrupted. The one advantage that *The Simpsons* has over *Doctor Who*, is the very format of its presentation as an animated sitcom, in that it can still depict the character of *Edna* without the voice of *Wallace*, but has instead chosen to retire the character out of respect for the death of the actor (Gunning). In doing so, *The Simpsons* can hide behind its use of caricature as a narratological device, embedding the mechanics of its plot through the depiction of its characters, and recasting them if necessary (McCarthy; Miller; West).

The characterisation of *The Doctor* as a *Time Lord* depends on the depiction of its characters through the mechanics of its plot throughout *Doctor Who*, as well as a much more elaborate form of caricature. It also relies on the type of its narrative as a science-fiction in the style of the presentation of an animated sitcom, like *The Simpsons*, which allows *Doctor Who* to circumvent a number of traditional stereotypes with imaginary events and people through the use of certain costumes for recurring species, like the *Daleks*¹¹, or the *Cybermen*¹²; make-up and/or prostheses for some humanoid species, like the *Ood*¹³, or *The Trees of Cheem*¹⁴; special effects for some non-humanoid species, like those of the *Atraxi*¹⁵, or the *The Mighty Jagraffess of the Holy Hadrojassic Maxarodenfoe*¹⁶; as well as a combination of practical and digital effects for any number of other alien species, like the *Empress of the Racnoss*¹⁷; as both literal and figurative masks, or live action caricatures (“List of *Doctor Who* universe creatures and aliens”). *The Doctor* in *Doctor Who* is a unique form of caricature that is embedded through the characterisation, rather than the presentation, of *The Doctor* as a species of alien that is capable of regenerating their body at the expense of their physiognomy, which, in turn, doubles as a convenient plot device. In 1966, for example, due to bad health, and deteriorating relations with the new production team, William Hartnell (1963–66), then the first and only portrayal of *The Doctor*, left the programme after his contract expired (Howe et al.). It was during this time that the concept of regeneration was created in order to explain the departure of Hartnell with the replacement of Patrick Troughton (1966–69), a noticeably younger, altogether different portrayal of *The Doctor*, thereby preserving a false sense of continuity¹⁸. Troughton not only permitted a new interpretation of *The Doctor*, softening the fatherly approach of Hartnell's previous characterisation with a

¹⁰ see season 1, episode 2, ‘Bart the Genius’ (1990).

¹¹ see season 1, series 2, episode 2, ‘The Daleks’ (1963).

¹² see season 4, story 29, ‘The Tenth Planet’ (1966).

¹³ see series 2, episode 8, ‘The Impossible Planet’ (2006).

¹⁴ see series 1, episode 2, ‘The End of the World’ (2005).

¹⁵ see series 5, episode 1, ‘The Eleventh Hour’ (2010).

¹⁶ see series 1, episode 7, ‘The Long Game’ (2005).

¹⁷ see Christmas Special episode ‘The Runaway Bride’ (2006).

¹⁸ it is unclear who, precisely, came up with the concept of regeneration, or when; either during season 3, series 9, episodes 1–4, of ‘The War Machines’ (1966), written by Ian Stuart Black; during season 4, series 1, episodes 1–4, of ‘The Smugglers’ (1966), written by Brian Hayles; during season 4, series 2, episodes 1–2, of ‘The Tenth Planet’ (1966), written by Kit Pedler; and/or possibly during season 4, series 2, episodes 3–4, of ‘The Tenth Planet’ (1966), written by Kit Pedler, and Gerry Davis.

far less serious, almost happy-go-lucky portrayal of the same character, but the same character moving forward in time, and yet, somehow differently.

“It is obvious that the infantile fantasies we all cherish still in the unconscious {immortality, eternity, neverendingness} play continually into myth, fairy tale, and the teachings of the church,” according to Joseph Campbell, “as symbols of indestructible being. This is helpful, for the mind feels at home with the images, and seems to [p. 152] be remembering something already known.” (pp. 151-152). Indeed, “as [an] eternal man—perfected, unspecified, universal—” Campbell suggests that the hero needs to be “reborn”, renewed, or regenerated, “return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed.” (p. 15). There is no lesson to be learned, as such, because *The Doctor* embodies the nature of the hero and the hero’s journey, simultaneously, as a kind of superhero¹⁹, one that foreshadows the prospect of an eternal man, or a neverendingness with strings attached, through the concept of regeneration. The relationship between being and time, in other words, defines and differentiates the relationship between the hero and the hero’s journey, or, quite literally in the case of *The Doctor*, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. It also enables the transition from one portrayal of *The Doctor* to the next incarnation in a canonical fashion, bridging the gap between a plot hole and a canon hole²⁰, while playing into our deepest sense of being and time as a being in time ourselves. “What is understood is that time and eternity are two aspects of the same experience-whole,” as Campbell puts it, “two planes of the same nondual effable; i.e., the jewel of eternity is in the lotus of birth and death: *om mani padme hum*.” (p. 130). The death of the one cannot be understood without the birth, and rebirth, of the other, and vice versa.

The Doctor has been portrayed by at least thirteen different actors²¹, so far, twelve of them who identify as male. The most recent incarnation of *The Doctor*, portrayed by Jodie Whittaker²², is championed for being the first of these actors who identify as female (Lutes), challenging the notion of *The Doctor*’s heterosexuality. This change was previously hinted at, or not, by the eighth incarnation of *The Doctor*’s childhood friend and arch nemesis *The Master*, portrayed by Michelle Gomez as the indefatigable *Missy*²³; another *Time Lord* who has been portrayed by at least eight different actors²⁴, so far, who identify as male, including the most recent incarnation, portrayed by Sacha Dhawan²⁵. It is interesting to note that there is not nearly as much

¹⁹ “... when the hero represents the transcendent as a superhero... the boon is redoubled and what has beentaught be comes greater than ‘the word’ (Campbell, p. 202) of the hero what preceded them, and those, and thus the difficult task goes beyond the ultimate towards the unlimited. It cannot be rationalized into a nonentity in order to refresh what has been taught even if ‘the wisdom brought forth from the deep’ (Campbell p. 202) can be learned.” (D’Aloia²; p. 1).

²⁰ “These storylines can also break the lore, as it were, of their own canon through the strain and build-up of inconsistencies in continuity and overfamiliarity, not unlike a plot hole, or a canon hole, but where a plot hole is typically restricted to the lore of its own storyline, a canon hole has momentum, and with it the potential to ricochet throughout multiple storylines” (D’Aloia¹; p. 3).

²¹ this figure does not include those actors, like Richard Hurndall (1983), and John Hurt (2013), who performed brief cameos as *The Doctor*.

²² see series 10, special episode ‘Twice Upon a Time’ (2017), and series 11, episode 1 ‘The Woman Who Fell To Earth’ (2018).

²³ see series 8, episode 11 ‘Dark Water’ (2014).

²⁴ this figure does not include those actors, like Norman Stanley (1971), Gordon Tipple (1996), and WilliamHughes (2007), who performed brief cameos as *The Master*.

²⁵ see series 12, episode 1-2, ‘Spyfall’ (2020).

controversy surrounding Gomez and her portrayal of *The Master*, however, as there has been concerning Whittaker and her portrayal of *The Doctor*, seemingly hijacked by a host of anti-woke sentiment geared towards the so-called political correctness elite (Joest; Nicholson; Power). This controversy follows in the wake of the Me Too movement of recent years, as well as the breaking down of gender identity as a social construct, and yet, *Doctor Who* has always broached these sorts of topics as a science fiction. “The prime example of this is Captain Jack Harkness,” according to Alessandra J. Pelusi “who hails from a 51st century that has reached total gender fluidity. Also starring in the *Doctor Who* spinoff, *Torchwood*... the openly pansexual (i.e., someone with the capability of being attracted to others regardless of their gender identity or biological sex) Captain Jack Harkness has become a role model in the UK and beyond.” (p. 70). If anything, changing genders, just like changing actors, simply changes the nature of the relationship one has with the hero and the hero’s journey, from a perspective that intentionally differs from our own—and the genre of science-fiction has always been a sign of the times, a veritable ‘zeitlich’ to our own zeitgeist.

“Science Fiction [SF] has been praised and criticised as a predictor of the future,” to paraphrase John Clute, “both perhaps unfairly. SF has never really aimed to tell us when we might reach other planets, develop new technologies, or meet aliens: SF speculates about why we might want to do these things, and how their consequences might affect our lives and our planet.” (p.9). It is ultimately a way to teach ourselves about ourselves with fiction and hyperbole, and *Doctor Who* represents a part of an ongoing relationship between the image and the viewer as both the object and the subject of historicity, movement, and change, through the very characterisation of *The Doctor* as a *Time Lord*. In 1966, for example, for my father growing up, *The Doctor* was a combination of William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton, and John Pertwee, and that was eventually eclipsed by the beloved Tom Baker (1974–81); for myself, it was a brief, but no less memorable, stint by Christopher Eccleston (2005), then abruptly, but no less fondly, followed by David Tennant (2005–10), and Matt Smith (2010–13); and for somebody else, it will be Peter Davidson (1981–1984), and Colin Baker (1984–1986), or Sylvester McCoy (1987–189), and Paul McGann (1996), or Peter Capaldi (2014–17), and Jodie Whittaker, whose departure has already been confirmed by several news sources (Abbott; Belam; Honebeek). And so, our relationship with *Doctor Who* perfectly encapsulates this sense of what Heidegger refers to as the “character of Da-sein, which is veiled in its whence and whither, but in itself all the more openly disclosed, this ‘that it is’, the *thrownness* of this being into its there; it is thrown in such a way that it is the there as being-in-the-world” (p. 127), where *The Doctor* represents a being in time and a time in being throughout us and without us, simultaneously.

If one can disregard for the time being the obvious fact that *Doctor Who* is fictional, the culmination of an inherently anthropocentric creation and design, then the concept of the alien represents the notion of an other, an otherness, another, anotherness, that requires modification in order to be different from ourselves without being too different from ourselves. Consequently, the concept of the alien, just like the concept of a God, or godlike being, resembles that which we are always capable of conceiving of without necessarily understanding as a being, as such, totally different from ourselves as ourselves. *The Doctor*, like *The Master*, is an abstraction of the concept

of a God in so far as our own inherently anthropocentric creation and design is limited by, and thus, *The Doctor* constitutes an extension, or expression, of this time in being throughout us and without us, simultaneously. There is no example of the concept of the alien, in other words, despite that we have no proof or example of the concept of a God, only the selfsame contents—immortality, eternity, neverendingness—as an extension, or an expression, of this time as being-in-the-world. This conceptualisation, or characterisation, of time can be explored phenomenologically through a series of embodiments, caricatures, narratives, metaphors, and as the basis for what Ian Bogost refers to as an *Alien Phenomenology* through metaphorism: the epistemological equivalent of gesturing at concepts indirectly through other concepts that one lacks the ability to comprehend by and of themselves. “Ethical judgement itself proves a metaphorism,” according to Bogost, “an attempt to reconcile the being of one unit in terms of another. We mistake it for the object’s withdrawn essence” (p. 79), when in reality, any attempt to reconcile the being of one unit in terms of another often results in reflections of ourselves as ourselves, or a change in perspective.

Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* is sitting on my desk, unfinished, half-red, half-remembered as a collection of pages, with individual words, pictures, ideas of ideas, references, intertextualities, translations, the trees themselves, their manufacture, the publisher’s choice of stock paper, and so it goes. No one thing exists by and of itself because it is interconnected with another thing, and another thing. It recedes a bit like Plato’s objections to poetry—and, yes, I realise that I am using an analogy, another metaphor, within a metaphor, to criticise a metaphor—but this is the same process that Plato uses to critique and criticise poetry, always twice removed from the facticity of historicity²⁶. If, through metaphorism, understanding of the object can be achieved through a misunderstanding, as it were, of the subject through the object, then *The Doctor* not only represents a being in time as a time in being, but an expression of the concept of time as we both understand it and misunderstand it while our comprehension of it evolves and improves upon itself as itself. Bogost writes that “It’s not turtles all the way down, but metaphors” (p. 84), in reference to the member of an audience who attended a guest lecture by Stephen Hawking about the historicity of The Big Bang, within a reference to the facticity of Terry Pratchett’s infamous *Discworld* series. The process that Bogost goes through in demonstrating metaphorism is replete with metaphorism, too, so much so that the physicalisation of the idea of metaphorism, the ink on the page, the shapes that they make, the language that they communicate, is only ever a reflection of a reflection of a reflection of the being we are trying to know what it is, again, like the reflection of a mirror. *Doctor Who* is one such reflection, or refraction, of our own being, and the *thrownness* of this being into its lot in life, in space, and time.

²⁶ “But temporality is at the same time the condition of the possibility of historicity as a temporal mode of being of Da-sein itself, is called history (world-historical occurrences). Historicity means the constitution of being of the ‘occurrence’ of Da-sein as such;” as Heidegger puts it, “it is the ground for the fact that something like the discipline of ‘world history’ is at all possible and historically belongs to world history. In its factual being Da-sein always is as and ‘what’ it already was. Whether explicitly or not, it *is* its past. It is its own past not only in such a way that its past, as it were, pushes itself along ‘behind’ it, and that it possesses what is past as a property that is still objectively present and at times has an effect on it. Da-sein ‘is’ its past in the manner of *its* being which, roughly expressed, on each occasion ‘occurs’ out of its future. In its manner of existing at any given time, and accordingly also with the understanding of being that belongs to it, Da-sein grows into a customary interpretation of itself and grows up in that interpretation.” (p. 17).

In terms of my original paper *On the Future of Narrative*: “The future of narrative is limited, then, by the very sense of imagination it embodies, and that is relative to oneself, and one’s own anthropocentrism, of which narrative has yet to, and yet may never, escape from. It is an anthropocentric mortality masking as an anthropocentric causality, that struggles to conceive beyond itself, beyond its progeny, even though technology demands it, now, and exponentially, through science, and science-fiction.” (p. 7). *Doctor Who*, in this respect, is able to address and redress this problem precisely because it is a serial television programme. It is ongoing, recurring, changing. The very sense of imagination that it embodies is relative to itself as itself throughout itself, and its temporality as both the object and the subject of its own movement, one that feeds back into the character of Da-sein which is veiled in its whence and whither, but in itself remains all the more openly disclosed. If “time is that from which Da-sein tacitly understands and interprets something like being at all”, to paraphrase Heidegger, then “Time must be brought to light and genuinely grasped as the horizon of every understanding and interpretation of being.” (p. 17). *The Doctor’s* understanding and interpretation of time, being and time are interchangeable properties as extensions and expressions of the one through the other. *Doctor Who*, through science fiction, can be interpreted as a kind of extension of consciousness, or metaconsciousness, of Da-sein as a factual, albeit fictional, creation of human expression. The Da-sein, which we ourselves in each case are, can be reconstituted into the Da-sein which we ourselves in each case could be under a given set of circumstances as a predictor of the future.

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