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## Tom Baker: taken out of context

Alec Charles

In the first half of the 1970s *Doctor Who* had grown overt in its politics – reflecting the collapse of empire, environmental crises, industrial relations, the Cold War and the threat of nuclear armageddon. But halfway through the decade, as Tom Baker took over from Jon Pertwee, the programme shifted away from contemporary earthbound adventures tied to the military and governmental institutions, and from such overt politicization.

Produced by the outgoing producer and written by the outgoing script editor, Baker's first story 'Robot' had concerned plans by British neo-Nazis to use a robot to build a super-weapon. The previous year the National Front had polled 16 per cent of the vote at a by-election, and the UK was witnessing a resurgence of far-right extremism. The story's political urgency was reflected in its uncharacteristically mundane setting: a present-day Britain in which the threat was earthly technology. Its concern with far-right ideologies was reflected in other stories that season: from the discussions of race in 'The Ark in Space' and the Afrikaner accents of the colonials in 'The Sontaran Experiment' (two years after the UN had labelled apartheid a crime against humanity) to the Nazi submariner look of the collaborator Kelman in 'Revenge of the Cybermen' and the Reich-like Kaleds in 'Genesis of the Daleks'. Yet, as Bould (218) has argued, the latter story's nostalgia for early 1940s moral polarizations did not confront contemporary tensions so much as it served to 'disavow Britain's ongoing history of colonial violence.' The programme's politics were thus becoming increasingly abstracted and distanced.

Any lingering concern with contemporary politics was soon replaced by an interest in pastiche and later parodying horror, science fiction and other genres (Tulloch and Alvarado 111). Towards the end of the 1970s the programme's rare attempts to wax political met with limited success: in 'The Sun Makers' (a satire upon tax bureaucracies), 'The Power of Kroll' (an incoherent allegory of colonial exploitation), 'Nightmare of Eden' (a ham-fisted polemic against drugs) and 'Destiny of the Daleks' (a blundering defence of the Cold War).

Baker's vintage adventures had instead offered stylish pastiches of classics of the horror genre, including *Frankenstein* ('The Brain of Morbius'), *The Mummy* ('The Pyramids of Mars'), *The Beast with Five Fingers* ('The Hand of Fear'), *The Masque of the Red Death* ('The Masque of Mandragora'), *The Wolf Man* and *Forbidden Planet* ('Planet of Evil'), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Quatermass II* ('The Android Invasion') and *The Thing* and *Day of the Triffids* ('The Seeds of Doom'). Other classic narratives also intruded: the legends of the Loch Ness monster, Noah's ark, the Cailleach, the Trojan horse, the Argonauts, Tithonus and the Minotaur. Whodunits and crime capers inspired 'The Robots of Death', 'The Ribos Operation' and 'City of Death' while sources as diverse as *The Manchurian Candidate*, *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *Dracula* informed other stories. At a time of economic and political decline *Doctor Who*'s timeless fantasies offered an escape from contemporary realities. By 1978 *Blake's 7* would have assumed its role as the BBC's premier sf satirist.

Baker's second story *The Ark in Space* (helmed by new producer Philip Hinchcliffe and written by new script editor Robert Holmes) established a theme pursued over the following seasons: monstrous possession. The following seasons saw Professors Sorenson and Scarman, scientists Winlett, Keeler, Ransome and Tremas, astrologer Hieronymous, the Doctor's companion Sarah and robot dog K9 all enthralled to alien possessions. Such possession – although a key theme in sf and horror (*The Exorcist* was released the year before Baker took the role) – was relatively rare in *Doctor Who*: in the preceding five years it had only featured significantly in 'Inferno', 'The Mutants' (in which the monsters turned out not to be so monstrous after all) and 'Planet of the Spiders' (in which monstrous possession had not led to monstrous transformation). Oddly it had barely even featured in 1971's 'The Daemons'.

The emergent theme of possession was paralleled by the doppelgänger habits of Zygons, Rutans, Argolins, androids, a mega-computer and a talking cactus. On other occasions those apparently human were revealed as monsters: the Collector, Xanxia, Cessair, Scaroth, Seers, Movellans and the entire population of Alzarius. Those who escaped possession were often transfigured, mutilated or mutated: Davros, Crayford, Morbius, the Master, Dask, Magnus Greel and the crew of the Hydrex. The Doctor was himself possessed (in 'The Invisible Enemy') and repeatedly encountered his doubles. Such was the prevalence of this theme that the Doctor's feigned transformations to maniacal malevolence in 'The Invasion of Time' and 'The Armageddon Factor' seemed immediately believable.

Enthralled to such generic obsessions, this period of *Doctor Who* tended to ignore its own contexts. This has attracted flack from critics of a historicist bent. Much rancour has, for instance, been aimed at 'The Talons of Weng-Chiang' for its representation of Chinese characters (Orman 85), but, while it echoed absurd racist stereotypes, the story was not about real history; it was about (the absurdity of) such representations in colonial fictions – from Sherlock Holmes to Fu Manchu.

In an age of geopolitical stalemates, political stagnation, stagflation and strikes, of apartheid, Idi Amin, the Khmer Rouge, the National Front and the IRA, *Doctor Who* abdicated its interest in current affairs. 'Warriors' Gate' was, for example, ostensibly concerned with slavery, but it divorced itself from the possibility of historical context: it was set in a nowhere land in which time came unstuck. Its slavery theme was thereby subsumed to a fantastical play on philosophy and physics.

If Pertwee's Doctor was the most human and his adventures the most earthly, Baker's was the most alien and detached from the world of today (Hills 153). He is a 'romantic' – an escapist from the burdens of material history. The Bohemian escapades of this 'perpetual outsider' see him instead 'walk in eternity' – which may be why his remains the most iconic and timeless incarnation of the nation's favourite Time Lord, the only one of the original series' leads to reprise his role in the show's fiftieth anniversary special.

## References

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