Celia Brayfield reckons we can’t do without ‘Dr Who’ and its uniquely low-tech brand of science fiction.

High anxiety

When Dr Who is suspended in early April, the nation will mourn. No other television series has achieved quite the same hold on the imagination of successive generations. The current audience is between seven and nine million, which is healthy enough. What is more remarkable is that the audience who will see Colin Baker vanquish the Time Lash and come face-to-ghastly-face with the Borad ranges in age from four to 44;
Dr Who is not merely a television entertainment—it is a life companion. When Michael Grade threatened to deprive this audience of the series, he naturally generated an asteroid-storm of protest. The Doctor’s disappearance has become so much a ‘cause’ that well-known rock stars have recorded a protest single in a miniature Band-Aid action.

In the era of Star Wars and Dune, when science fiction is about megamodels, big-screen spacescapes, starfighter barrages in Dolby stereo and rock stars in their streamlined underpants, Dr Who is only a technological mind-trip for those too small to put 10p in a Space Invaders machine. For all his chat about time particles exploding within a multi-dimensional implosion field, the Doctor’s unique appeal is not much to do with science fiction.

Dr Who’s cardinal qualities are irascibility and general incompetence. Sydney Newman, the Head of Drama who first launched the Tardis in time, and Verity Lambert, the series’ early producer, created an erratic personality whose age and appearance have varied but whose uncertain temper and memory remain constant. The children (as they were in the beginning) who travelled with the Doctor were in the care of an incompetent adult who had no idea where he was going or why, and who could be relied upon to panic in the presence of a hostile life form.

The Doctor’s past as a maverick Time Lord was not established until the end of the black-and-white era, and even then his arrogance seemed unwarranted. If he escaped it was more by good luck than good judgment. To the audience at whom the early series was aimed—14-year-olds from 1963—this ill-mannered and ineffective personality was a wonderful antidote to the adult propaganda image of authoritative, morally immaculate parents. The upcoming hippy generation was extremely receptive to the image of an adult who demanded respect he did not deserve.

High anxiety, rather than high-tech, is the appeal of the series. Take, for instance, the Doctor’s peculiar lack of technical ability, or even appetite for technology. Dr Who does not zap aliens with phasers, or get himself beamed up to his craft, or soil his hands with the space equivalent of an oily rag. He consults charts, not a VDU.

If he uses a computer, it is the supremely user-friendly K9, a walking pun with a waggly tail. The Tardis itself is an unpredictable vehicle, prone to breakdowns and freak faults; like the coveted consumer durables of the Fifties, the Tardis has a high degree of built-in obsolescence.

The Doctor’s difficulties with machinery are epitomised by his eternal struggle with the Daleks, who are, in fact, among the most mechanistic sci-fi adversaries ever created. From the Alien to the Zygons, most space beings have four limbs, a body and a head (though not, to paraphrase Jean-Luc Godard, necessarily in that order). No one could call the Daleks humanoid. Dr Who versus the Daleks is man versus machine. The scenario finds ready sympathy with all pre-cybernetic generations.

Instead of glorified technology, Dr Who takes into space a remarkable number of emotional symbols of pre-war Britain—the blue police box, the cricket sweater, the gamp. Douglas Adams, a mid-Seventies member of the team, wanted a scenario set at a Test Match. With the entire universe as his domain, the Doctor is inclined to pitch up at places like Gatwick airport or Loch Ness, or take a hand in great moments of schoolbook history like the Crusades or Culloden.

In view of this strong visual identification with Britain, it is not surprising that the mainstream of American science fiction appreciation cannot relate to Dr Who. ‘Whimsical and hopelessly lowbrow,’ said an US sci-fi journal, marvelling that the British should find fascination in such stuff.