

Lost in Time

Bureaucrats, not Daleks, are the deadliest foes of “Doctor Who.”

by DANIEL J. FLYNN

An English film collector recently unveiled two “Doctor Who” episodes not seen since the 1960s. For science-fiction fans, the revelation is equivalent to discovering the lost city of Atlantis—which is precisely what the titular Doctor accomplishes in one of the unearthed stories. Everyone else finds the disappearance of the shows as confusing as his “dimensionally transcendent” blue police-box time machine.

How on Gallifrey could a respected broadcaster have exiled television’s most famous time traveler to the dustbin of history?

For the uninitiated, “Doctor Who” premiered the day after John F. Kennedy’s assassination and aired its last episode the year the Iron Curtain fell. Over its 26-year original run it became a British institution—and a staple for all-American nerds catching up on PBS. Essentially a children’s show that so appealed to adults that fans of all ages now tune in to its successful revival, the BBC series follows the travels of the Doctor, along with various human companions, in his Time and Relative Dimensions in Space (TARDIS) time machine that is famously larger on the inside than it is on the outside. Their adventures cross the universe and the millennia, bringing them into conflict with cyborgs, aliens, and even renegade members of the Doctor’s own race, the Time Lords of Gallifrey.

But the tale of “Doctor Who” stories getting lost in time and then mysteriously rematerializing is even more fantastic than the episodes themselves. The villains appear more ominous, and the heroes more colorful, than those on television’s longest-running science-fiction program. It’s a quest for cultural preservation, one whose themes—involving the perils of government enterprise, the power of unions, and tomorrow’s technology fostering a cult of yesterday—speak profoundly to the here and now.

Actors’ guilds, state television, and mindless bureaucracy combined to do what enemies like the Master, the Cybermen, and even the Daleks never could: exterminate the Doctor.

Arriving in 1963, at the peak of automation fears, “Doctor Who” became a casualty of labor’s Luddite preoccupation with machine replacements. Britain’s actors’ guild, the nation’s last purely closed shop, prohibited more than one re-broadcast of any program, lest its members lose work to on-screen facsimiles of themselves. The musicians’ union and other trade guilds imposed similar restrictions. So ’70s-era employees of the state broadcasting behemoth, imagining neither a world without a closed shop nor one with the VCR, trashed, lost, and wiped all of the series’s ’60s-era masters. The Doctor, like so many of that decade’s characters, was there but can’t much remember the 1960s.

Time Lords have not nine lives but 13, regenerating in a new guise after each apparent death—a plot device contrived to keep the series going while changing its lead. Ironically, the incarnation that has fallen farthest down the memory hole is the unforgettable Second Doctor, played by Patrick Troughton from 1966 to 1969. Just five complete stories exist from his three seasons. Taking over a successful show from the ailing actor William Hartnell, Troughton revolutionized the role by not playing it. Unlike, say, James Bond or Sherlock Holmes, the Doctor becomes another character entirely when portrayed by another actor. “It’s not only his face that has changed,” traveling companion Ben explains upon first glimpsing the Second Doctor. “He doesn’t even act like him.”

Whereas his predecessor was a grandfatherly grouch, and his successor an action-hero dandy,

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Troughton played a comically avuncular “cosmic hobo.” He’s a cross between Charlie Chaplin and your eighth-grade science teacher. The extant filmic proof that he indeed played the role has sparked several successors—including the current Doctor, played by Matt Smith—to name Troughton as their favorite.

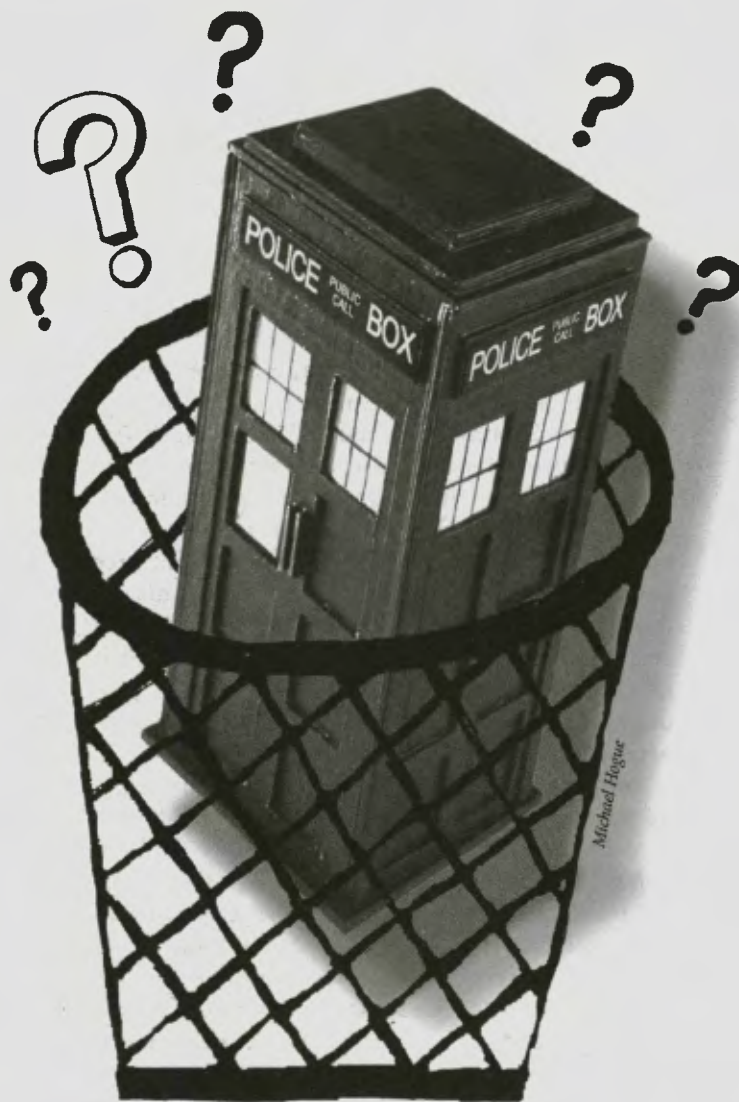
The face of a sad alcoholic clown under a Beatle George wig, Troughton’s Doctor was a mercurial, easily flustered eccentric whose nervous, child-like fears of the baddies seemed unbecoming of a superhero but so becoming of the Doctor. His “Oh, my word!” exclamations, fondness for whistling on a Medieval recorder, and disheveled bow ties suggested creative anachronism: he came from another planet’s future that was much like an Englishman’s past. And since a majority of the series’ missing episodes date to the Second Doctor’s run, Troughton can’t help but abide by the show business rule of always leaving the audience wanting more.

But the Second Doctor is hardly the only character out of Britain’s swinging ’60s to be stuck in a perpetual time loop. Other casualties of the BBC bureaucracy’s video vandalism include live performances by The Beatles and about half of the episodes of “Monty Python” predecessor “The Frost Report.” If it’s hard to imagine NBC, ABC, or CBS running ’60s programming as smart as the Beeb’s “At Last the 1948 Show,” it’s also hard to imagine the state broadcaster’s commercial American counterparts obliterating such programming by destroying the master tapes. State television misjudged as worthless what the market greatly valued. The absence of the profit motive helps explain the absence of more than 100 “Doctor Who” installments. Like public housing and public bathrooms, public broadcasting that belonged to everybody ultimately belonged to nobody. It was mistreated accordingly.

Problems endemic to any big bureaucracy, such as lack of accountability and lapses of internal communication, plagued the BBC and doomed the Doctor. As late as 1972, the government broadcaster possessed every “Doctor Who” episode. But as the show enjoyed a ’70s golden age with the exotic woolly-haired jokester Tom Baker performing the lead role, the bureaucrats behind the scenes feverishly erased

the show’s history.

The BBC Film Library didn’t retain the original masters because—interpreting their mandate as a “film” library strictly—the BBC transmitted the show on video, not film. The BBC Engineering Department, which transferred the original videos to film so that BBC Enterprises could more easily market the serials for foreign broadcast, kept an archive of the videos. But once BBC Enterprises indicated that they could no longer market the programs because of time restrictions imposed by the various talent unions, the engineers proceeded to junk the originals. They occupied valuable tape space that could be reused for other programs, and the shows seemed of no worth given the prohibitions on rebroadcast. The engineers assumed the film librarians maintained the originals, and the film librarians



assumed the engineers held onto them.

Negligent behind-the-scenes bureaucrats found a foil in passionate in-front-of-the-screens viewers. Sci-fi enthusiasts embarked upon a mission to rescue the Time Lord from the oblivion to which he had been consigned by Big Labor, Big Bureaucracy, and Big Government. The fan man among fan boys was Ian Levine, known heretofore as a mover behind the Northern Soul club-craze revival of Motownesque curios. Levine talked his way into the BBC in 1978 only to happen upon employees preparing to trash episodes of his favorite program. Levine recalled to a fanzine that he “threw an absolute fit.” He convinced the BBC to halt the company-wide junking.

Though the broadcaster had discarded all of the original videos on which it had transmitted “Doctor Who” in the 1960s, the network had distributed film duplicates abroad for foreign broadcast. Could

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outlets in Abu Dhabi, Lagos, and Los Angeles really have been more reverential toward classic BBC programming than the BBC itself? By the late 1970s, the hunt was on to save the past for the future.

The sun never sets on the British television empire, so missing episodes started reemerging in some peculiar locales. Levine tracked down three complete stories in Nigeria, which, because of diplomatic issues with its former motherland, delayed sending the find along. Three lost parts of the First Doctor’s “Reign of Terror” serial located in Cyprus escaped 1974’s Turkish invasion unscathed; alas, several other episodes in a heavily shelled vault didn’t make it out alive. Film reels turned up at flea markets, in a Mormon church’s basement, and within the bowels of the BBC itself.

Even state censors proved more sensitive to the program’s preservation than did the state network that had produced it. Especially scary clips of otherwise vanished programs reappeared in the archives of the Australian Broadcasting Company. Other discovered episodes contained Arabic and Spanish overdubs. Since legions of dedicated fans in the pre-VHS era had audio-taped television episodes, such

stories have been reconstructed—for the missing-segments serial “The Invasion,” for example, new animation was combined with old sound to piece together the eight-part story for DVD release.

As Whostorians saved the Doctor from his civil-servant executioners, the furthest recesses of fandom imagined a strange enemy in the “private collector.” Reel aficionados had continually shared their bounty with real fans, as demonstrated by the British Film Institute’s “Missing Believed Wiped” event last December, where the most recently rediscovered episodes were unveiled. But legends persist of wealthy misanthropes holding episodes hostage or greedily enjoying private screenings as true fans went without.

It is this mythic caricature, rather than “Doctor Who’s” very real grey-suited state-employed despoilers, that passes for the story’s villain. The copious online literature covering the lost episodes exhibits meticulous knowledge of such minutiae as which episode marks the last of the 405-line screen transmissions and which heralds the beginning of 625-line video. But talk of bullying unions or state malfeasance is missing from the conversation about missing “Doctor Who” stories. Leave it to science-fiction fans to exhibit supersized imaginations, as capable of

envisioning a secret society of aristocrats squirreling away lost pop-culture artifacts as they are of anticipating something that has been lost for decades showing up the day after tomorrow.

But after the 1991 Hong Kong discovery of the four-part 1967 story “The Tomb of the Cybermen,” the finds grew meager and the fans grew pessimistic. “I don’t think there is anything else left to find,” Levine opined on a documentary accompanying a DVD release of lost episodes. “Please prove me wrong. I think there will always be 110 missing ‘Doctor Who’ episodes.”

There are now 106 missing episodes. Still this vexatious incompleteness haunts obsessive-compulsive hoarders of adolescent memories. Ian Levine’s manias extend to collecting every D.C. Comics release, organizing his matrilineal side into the largest family reunion of all time, and—here’s where things get straitjacket strange—staging, according to Simon Reynolds’s *Retromania*, “a bizarre re-enactment of his childhood, reuniting all thirty of his classmates from Blackpool’s Arnold School, along with the original teachers, garbing them in authentic sixties uniforms and recreating a typical school day

complete with morning assembly, gym lessons and a game of rugby." One can't help but view Levine's quest to track down the lost episodes as an extension of this ongoing re-creation of his childhood.

Levine is disturbing in the way one's reflection in a funhouse mirror is. He is an exaggerated version of us. We live in a backward era when the past encroaches on the present. Remember that weird kid from fourth grade? He's even creepier at 40 trying to be your Facebook friend. Jonesing for a sonic fix of Quarterflash's "Find Another Fool"? It can be yours for just \$1.29 on iTunes. Did you watch "Hawaii Five-O" in the '70s? Well, it's on again in prime time with a better looking Kono. Even "Doctor Who," after ending its original run in 1989, returned to the BBC airwaves in 2005 to enjoy renewed success and spin-off several derivative series.

Tomorrow's technology transforms today into yesterday. New releases yield to back catalogue on

iPods, Hulu, Netflix, and beyond. Never has nostalgia seemed so cutting edge. Our TARDIS only travels backwards.

One glimpses a sign of the lameness of our times on the marquee above the box office, whose top ten earners last year consisted exclusively of remakes, sequels, and movies based on old comic books. If a fifth installment of "The Fast and the Furious" strikes you as five movies too many, consider that the ticket-buying public disagrees: "Fast Five" out-sold all but five other films in 2011. Whoever said leave the past in the past didn't say it loud enough.

Surely the Doctor has more lively junctures to visit than 2012, a hodge-podge of yesteryear with little to mark its place on the time-space continuum. We can blame the BBC for banishing so many of the Doctor's adventures from the here and now. But can we really blame the Doctor for rematerializing in a more vibrant age than our own? ■

OLD and RIGHT

One afternoon just before departure I took my passport along and crossed the bridge to the German side. I was overwhelmed by the contrast. Here, more clearly than anywhere I had ever been, one saw the difference between a country that had involved itself in two world wars and one that had not. On the Swiss side one had in every way this wonderful feeling of intactness, both in space and in time. One felt that the generations had merged imperceptibly into one another, that values of the present had been erected carefully and reverently on the foundations of the values of the past, that families had remained families.

On the German side, all was different. Whether or not there had been physical destruction by bombing, I do not know; but the place had the air of a town that had been torn to pieces and was being reconstructed: no harmony, no center, little beauty. And the people were as different as night from day. There was, compared with the prim Swiss, a ravaged, desperate, and brutal quality to their faces. One saw at once that here was a place which had been through moments of something like a breakdown of civilization. There was still a tinge of wolfishness in the way people viewed each other: the memory of a time (the final years of war and Nazidom) when man was enemy of man, as in the Russian Civil War.

On the other hand, there was, as compared with

Switzerland, a certain wide-flung, careless energy on the German side. The Swiss, too, were energetic, but with them this force was contained, well-bred, bourgeois to the core. In Germany, these middle-class values had disappeared, so that one had, along with the sense of coarseness and brutal competition, a sense of greater scope and power and ruthlessness of action.

Curiously enough, the women of the German side had also been in some way affected by the disintegration and looseness of values. They had the sheer, coarse, sexual attractiveness of primitive women, which again contrasted strongly with their prim and repressed sisters across the Rhine. Surely, one thought, this cannot be just the force of environment: this must reflect the fact that in Switzerland, over the course of generations, the discreet influence of parents, interested less in the girl's physical attractiveness than in her qualities as a person and a member of society, has been important in shaping marriages; whereas in Germany the children of this age are the products of the catch-as-catch-can sexual mores that have prevailed in that country for the past forty years. Here, by consequence, the sultry belle of the streets has taken a prominent share in motherhood. Her children show it.

—George Kennan in Reinfelden, Switzerland, 1959.
(*Sketches From a Life*, 1989)