## CONFERENCE DRAFT

## The Hero With Eleven Faces (so far): Doctor Who and the triumph of unsettlement

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I began to write this paper on holiday in Brittany. I knew, already, that my proposed title had been a hostage to fortune. When I submitted the original abstract, Matt Smith had seemed to be securely in role and I was entertaining notions that he might be aiming for a Pertwee-matching five years (a Tom Baker’s dozen of seven being outside any actor’s range in the 21st century, surely). However, as I attempted, finally, to type out an opening paragraph, I found myself flitting back and forth between the Word document, Facebook and Twitter, waiting impatiently on the announcement of a new Doctor. My own enthusiastic speculations – given that we already knew that he *wasn’t* going to be a woman – favoured Joseph Gilgun, Daniel Kaluyaa and Ben Whishaw. Peter Capaldi had been mentioned as a late favourite, but I learned a long time ago (Patterson Joseph, Q.E.D.) not to believe the hype.

It was Peter Capaldi, of course.

And so: ‘The Hero With *Twelve* Faces (so far): Doctor Who and the triumph of unsettlement’.

It strikes me now that the particular fortune to which my title was hostage is a perfect illustration of the theme of the paper: that the core of *Doctor Who* (if it can be said to have one), the secret of its success (if such a thing can ever really be divined), is a kind of radical instability, a creative excitement of doubt – what I like to call ‘unsettlement’. Ever since William Hartnell decided to hang up his silver wig in 1966 and the production team came up with the process – but not the name, definition or developed mythology – of regeneration, successive eras of children (and adults) have gone through the exquisite uncertainty of not knowing the future face or character of their hero. As Mark Gatiss tweeted during the countdown to the Capaldian revelation:

‘Amazing to think that I watched the last episode of ‘Planet of the Spiders’ without even knowing Jon Pertwee was leaving. I was devastated!’ (6.27pm, 4 Aug, 2013)

‘And now a whole young audience who’ve only known and loved the brilliant Matt Smith are about to go through the same exquisite trauma!’ (6:32pm, 4 Aug, 2013)

Whatever else it might be – and it is many, many things to many, many people – *Doctor Who* is a beautifully unstable phenomenon. This, it seems to me, is its greatest strength, the secret of its enduring success, and also a mark of its cultural power and significance.

The present paper is part of a wider project proposing a theoretical model of media development and production based around the idea of ‘unsettlement’. This contends that all media undergo a period of restlessness akin to the *incunabulaic* period of the printing press, in which form and content (and here, as elsewhere, it’s meaningless to attempt to separate the two) are yet to be defined, fixed, settled. This period, characterised by self-consciousness and experimentation, is followed by gradual assimilation within a ‘mythic’ world-view, typified by more settled processes of narration, representation, reception. Once a medium has been integrated culturally, the restless energies of its inception are diverted into marginal practices that nevertheless inform and at times challenge the mainstream. When a medium is new it is unknown and unknowable, irregular and rudely stamped: this makes it vulnerable, but it also makes it rich with possibilities. The rough magic of films made in the first decade of cinema by the likes of Georges Méliès, R.W. Paul and Cecil Hepworth are no longer possible once the period of formal consolidation between Edwin S. Porter’s The Great Train Robbery (1903) and D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation (1915) has set in place the narrative conventions of the medium. Similarly, the gloriously inchoate animation of Émile Cohl and J. Stuart Blackton begins to recede from view – but to take on a singular kind of aura – once professional studios are founded by John Bray (in 1914) and Walt Disney (in 1922) and the practice of the animator has been named (the Oxford English Dictionary dates this to 1919).

There are notable precursors and analogues to the idea of unsettlement, and its theoretical location can be found somewhere between John Keats’s formulation of ‘negative capability’, Marshall McLuhan’s model of ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ media, Thomas Kuhn’s concept of ‘paradigm shift’, and notions of the Menippean or carnivalesque arising from the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva. For the purposes of this paper, however, it will be sufficient to consider the process as one which tends to incline media towards the conditions of the anomalous zone in the traditional structuralist diagram of binary opposition. Put simply, *Doctor Who* is full of things that ‘don’t quite fit’. Resistant to generic categories, merging futurism and nostalgia, a science fiction series that is really *not* a science fiction series, its eponymous hero (sometimes *anti-*hero) is a character who changes his appearance and personality as a means of cheating or delaying death, who is humanoid but not human, who seems (emphasis on *seems*) to have the potential to transgress boundaries of race, ethnicity, and gender, who is isolated but affable, combative but pacific, endlessly enigmatic but strangely familiar, entirely unpredictable but ultimately trustworthy. His home is a ship that demolishes physics: much, *much* bigger on the inside than the outside, it can travel anywhere in time, anywhere in space…

None of this is news to anyone here and the established critical canon, from Tulloch and Alvarado’s *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text* (1983) onwards, is full of reflections on the anomalous and mutable nature of the format. David Butler, for instance, notes its ‘openness to diversity and change’, its ‘blurring of boundaries’ and its ‘defi[ance of] easy classification’ (8), and James Chapman refers to its ‘strategy of periodic renewal’ (3). When entering into any discussion touching upon the fundamental flexibility of *Doctor Who*, in other words, there is always a danger of being drawn into the E-Space of ‘persistent folk theories’ identified by Butler (19). Even so, it seems to me that these folk theories – hovering between received opinion, unoriginal observation and necessary myth – are inevitable products of a permanently unsettled condition that has done more than simply ensure survival.

The scope for analysis of unsettlement within *Doctor Who* is considerable so, given the constraints of a 20 minute conference paper, I’m going to restrict myself to exploring the idea through a consideration of the character – or, more accurately, the *characters* – of the Doctor himself.

Strikingly, one of the folk theories mentioned by Butler – that *Doctor Who* has ‘a format that can apparently go anywhere and tell any kind of story’ (19) – is effectively repeated by the Doctor himself when, as played by Matt Smith in ‘The Eleventh Hour’, he entices Amy Pond to join him on his travels: ‘So. All of time and space. Everything that ever happened or ever will. Where do you want to start?’ The Doctor, in other words, believes his own hype, and so he should: the condition of unsettlement is, as I’ve said, characterised by self-consciousness and experimentation, manifested in a sense of mystery, possibility, unpredictability, and disturbance. These qualities, as they can be traced throughout the fantastical phenomenon that is *Doctor Who*, begin and end and begin again with the character – or, more accurately, the *characters* – of the Doctor himself. Which takes us back to where we started and the profound unsettlement of regeneration.

Interviewed by Zoe Ball in the closing minutes of the (frankly excruciating) *Doctor Who Live: The Next Doctor* on Sunday 4 September 2013, Peter Capaldi provided an intriguing response to a question from a fan in Stevenage. Asked whether he had been practising in front of the mirror saying ‘Hello, I’m the Doctor’, he replied:

## I don’t say ‘I’m the Doctor.’ I’m surprised now to see Doctor Who looking back. That’s what’s really strange. You look in the mirror and suddenly, strangely, he’s looking back. And he’s not me yet. But he’s reaching out. Hopefully we’ll get it together.

## Earlier in the interview, Capaldi had revealed that – having not ‘really played Doctor Who since [he] was nine, in the playground’ – he had prepared for the audition by reading from old *Doctor Who* scripts in front of the mirror, but that Steven Moffat had ‘already written some scenes that referred to a Doctor of my ilk’. In referring so early to the ‘ilk’ of his Doctor, perhaps partly known but essentially unknowable, Capaldi reveals not only an actor’s uncertainty about taking on a new role but also a sense of the intimate mystery that is fundamental to *Doctor Who*. Considering the origins of the television series – in particular, the ‘official line’ taken by Sydney Newman, Cecil Webber and Donald Wilson that ‘*Doctor Who* was categorically *not* science fiction’ (20) – Butler has claimed that, from conception, it ‘was a programme with an identity crisis, but [that] this crisis would result in a genuine strength’. (21) This strength, I would argue, is the strength of the unsettled – the unfixed, the unresolved, the unknown – and the image of Capaldi in front of the mirror, searching for another identity in his own reflection, becomes richly, deeply metaphorical.

## Approaching the genesis of *Doctor Who* from a slightly different perspective, Miles Booy notes that the series ‘began with almost no back story’ (p. 73) and no sense of ‘a well-worked-out internal continuity’ (p. 6). The Doctor’s challenge to the trespassing schoolteachers Ian Chesterton and Barbara Wright in the first episode of *An Unearthly Child* is emblematic in this respect and is a brilliantly terse invocation of the essential mystery contained in the title of the series:

## Have you ever thought what it's like to be wanderers in the Fourth Dimension? Have you? To be exiles? Susan and I are cut off from our own planet, without friends or protection. But one day we shall get back. Yes, one day...

After this there were teasers scattered thinly across the 1960s – the First Doctor’s encounter with another of his race in *The Time Meddler* (1965), the Second Doctor’s recollections of a family in a wonderful scene from *The Tomb of the Cybermen* (1967) – but nothing substantial until the Time Lords were finally named and encountered *en masse* in 1969’s *The War Games.* Their home planet, Gallifrey, remained unnamed until *The Time Warrior* at the start of the Third Doctor’s final season.

By the time of John Nathan-Turner’s controversial decade as series producer from 1980 to 1989, a concern (to some, a damaging obsession) with continuity seemed to indicate an extreme *proliferation* of back story. This led to a situation in which issues of mythic integrity and coherence were being ferociously debated during a sixteen year period when most of the world thought (if it thought of it at all) that *Doctor Who* was dead. Booy again: ‘So many stories, so many Doctors: canonicity was the debate which consumed fandom in the 1990s.’ (p. 158)

The point here is surely that the initial unsettlement of *Doctor Who* established optimum conditions for it to remain unsettled: with so little fixed from the beginning – with so little even *known* – succeeding generations of writers, actors, designers, composers, directors and producers were able to gradually build and extend and revise and inhabit the format, without ever exhausting it. Now, in 2013, half a century on from Hartnell’s ‘wanderers in the Fourth Dimension’ speech, the vital air of mystery that inaugurated the series has not only survived its developing back story but has become literalised as part of it. The exchange between the Doctor and Dorium Maldovar at the end of ‘The Wedding of River Song’ is representative in this respect:

Dorium: So many secrets, Doctor. I'll help you keep them of course.

Doctor: Well, you're not exactly going anywhere are you?  
Dorium: But you're a fool nonetheless. It's all still waiting for you. The Fields of Trenzalore. The Fall of the Eleventh. And the question.  
The Doctor: Goodbye Dorium.  
Dorium: The first question! The question that must never be answered! Hidden in plain sight! The question you've been running from all your life! Doctor *who*? Doctor *Who?* Doctor *WHO*!

To be so confidently, stridently, epiphanically unsettled after fifty hectic years in time and space is a clear indication of how closely the charismatic endurance of the format is bound up in the charismatic mystery of its central character. Because, of course, the ‘first question’ was asked by Ian in that first episode, rejecting Barbara’s assumption that the unearthly child’s given name of Foreman is shared by her strange grandfather: **‘That's not his name. Who is he? Doctor *Who*? Perhaps if we knew his name, we might have a clue to all this…’**

Much was made, in the run up to ‘The Name of the Doctor’ (2013), of the possibility that the first question might finally be answered and this led to an almost shrieking paranoia in some areas of fandom: the idea that this fundamentally unsettled figure should suddenly, without any consultation, be given the defining characteristic of a proper name was greeted with as much horror as anticipation. And yet, the metafictional suppleness of *Doctor Who* means that it can play some delightfully subtle games with its own core mysteries. Dorium gives an assurance, after all, that the question ‘must never be answered’ and the tease about the name can be seen as a narrative embodiment of one of the hoariest old chestnuts in discourses about the programme: is *Doctor Who* the name of series or of its hero? Thinking of my Whovian childhood in the 1970s, I don’t recall ever being bothered by the fact that the Doctor’s yellow roadster Bessie had the number plate ‘WHO 1’ and yet I well remember the uneasy feeling I experienced when reading some of the earliest (and best) Target novelisations and discovering that he was referred to throughout as ‘Doctor Who’. An exchange between the Doctor and Clara Oswald in the recent episode ‘The Bells of St John’ makes witty play of this nominal uncertainty:

THE DOCTOR: Clara? Clara Oswald?

CLARA: Hello.

THE DOCTOR: Clara Oswin Oswald!

CLARA: Just Clara Oswald. What was that middle one?

THE DOCTOR: Do you remember me?

CLARA: No. Should I? Who are you?

THE DOCTOR: The Doctor! No? The Doctor?

CLARA: Doctor *who?*

THE DOCTOR: No, just The Doctor. Actually – sorry – could you just ask me that again?

CLARA: Could I what?

THE DOCTOR: Could you ask me that question again?

CLARA: Doctor who?

THE DOCTOR: OK, just once more.

CLARA: Doctor who?

THE DOCTOR: Ooh, yeah. Ooh. Do you know, I never realise how much I enjoy hearing that said out loud. Thank you.

CLARA: OK. [*She slams the door.*]

In a way, the Doctor has become a popular embodiment of the problem of deferred meaning at the heart of Derridean poststructuralism. And Dorium is right, of course. The question must never be answered, because it would always be a disappointment: it could never seem anything other than banal and anti-climactic. The Doctor has to remain unsettled, a restlessly and endlessly floating signifier. The first question is also the last question and could only ever produce the wrong answer. No wonder Ace decided to call him The Professor instead.

In the context of *Doctor Who,* the instabilities of the hero’s name are indexical of his character in ways that Clint Eastwood’s Man With No Name could only dream of.

The Doctor, a trickster and shapeshifter of uncertain but potentially infinite lifespan, can never be fixed in one persona, place or time. It can be argued that the period of greatest narrative settlement within *Doctor Who* was that between *Spearhead from Space* and *The Three Doctors* in the first three years of Jon Pertwee’s tenure. Exiled by the Time Lords to one place and time, working (grudgingly) in a semi-official role for a military organisation, and forced to rely on technologies such as the internal combustion engine for transportation, the Doctor became a man of action as much – perhaps more – than a man of mystery. Significantly, it was at this point that he came closest to achieving a settled name, albeit a fake one, adopting the alias ‘John Smith’. If, as I suspect, the condition of unsettlement can be associated with modes of cultural challenge and formal instability, it might not be a surprise to note that Pertwee’s more settled Doctor has often been cited (by Christopher Eccleston, among others) as being a more ‘Establishment’ figure than the other incarnations.

The surprising introduction of John Hurt’s character as a teaser for the Fiftieth Anniversary Special, inscribed as ‘the Doctor’ in an on-screen caption, has led to speculation that he will play an intermediate incarnation from the cataclysm of the Time War, positioned between Paul McGann’s Eighth and Christopher Eccleston’s Tenth. The 2008 Christmas Special, ‘The Next Doctor’, toyed briefly with the lineage, and previous multi-Doctor specials in 1973, 1983 and 1985 have shown it to be collapsible, but the television series hasn’t inclined towards such a destabilisation of the main character’s chronology since the mindbending duel in 1976’s *The Brain of Morbius*. Notoriously, the eight ‘extra’ faces glimpsed in the display during the mental battle between the Doctor and Morbius unsettled the long-held assumption that William Hartnell had played the Time Lord’s original incarnation. ‘How far, Doctor? How long have you lived?’ Morbius snarls during the contest, and producer Philip Hinchcliffe has acknowledged his intention of disrupting the neat succession. Like the question of whether Time Lord’s can live beyond their twelfth regeneration, introduced in *The Deady Assassin* from the same year, the ‘Morbius Doctors’ tend to emphasise the imaginative volatility of the mythology rather than constrict it within a set of hard expectations. The fact that the mystery faces flickering in Morbius’s machine were actually those of Hinchcliffe, Robert Holmes, Douglas Camfield, and other members of the production team, now looks like a deliciously ironic enactment of the ways in which the *Doctor Who* mythos has been created. I doubt that the poet and critic William Empson ever sat down to watch *The Brain of Morbius*, but if he did he might have mused upon this scene as a form of ‘self-inwoven simile’.

In attempting the approach the notion of unsettlement in *Doctor Who* through a consideration of the central mystery of the Doctor himself – the crucial unsettlement of a hero who has remained utterly and sometimes disturbingly unknowable, even as he has become reassuringly familiar – I suspect that I might be doing little more than finding another way of endorsing the notorious Tulloch and Alvarado diagnosis of the show’s ‘semiotic thickness’. If nothing else, however, I hope I’ve offered at least a few meaningful reflections on why a conference like this should be happening in 2013. According to one narrative of origins (and they’re all lies, of course), *Doctor Who* was initially conceived as a cheap and temporary gap-filler in the Saturday evening television schedules. It was never intended to last, and yet it seems to me that it was inadvertently and optimally *built* to do so. A product of the nascent phase of mass television in Britain in the early 1960s, its extraordinary revival in 2005 after a 16 year hiatus (broken briefly by the 1996 TV movie) coincided with a period of profound technological and social transition in the television medium worldwide. The aim here has been to suggest that, as a uniquely and brilliantly unsettled format, its imaginative richness predicated on an innate mutability of narrative form, aesthetic mode and cultural status, with core elements established as icons of the changeable, the show was constructed to become the quintessential fantasy of unsettlement.

Since the title of this paper adapts that of Joseph Campbell’s seminal book on mythology, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces,* it seems appropriate to move towards a conclusion by quoting a key passage from that work, one that will resonate with Whovians:

## Only birth can conquer death – the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be – if we are to experience long survival – a continual “recurrence of birth” (*palingenesia*) to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death. For it is by means of our own victories, if we are not regenerated, that the work of Nemesis is wrought…’ (Campbell, 16)

## Which leads us back, I think, to Peter Capaldi looking at himself in that most unsettled of mirrors.

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