

“Seeing patterns in things that aren’t there”⁴

Reading Doctor Who: The TV Movie as Pilot

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The 1996 *Doctor Who TV Movie* (hereafter TVM) holds a divisive place in *Doctor Who* fan culture. Before the “The Night of the Doctor” minisode and “The Day of the Doctor” (33.14) 50th anniversary celebrations, which cemented the Eighth Doctor (Paul McGann) firmly in the mythology and history of *Doctor Who*, there remained an uncertainty as to the canonicity of this post-Classic but pre-New *Who* Doctor. The notion of canonicity, discussed by *Doctor Who* novelist Lance Parkin in his piece “Canonicity Matters,” means that some things are considered part of the official *Doctor Who* universe (i.e., the TV episodes), while other things may be considered outside the official BBC-authorized narrative (e.g., the novels written between the end of the Classic series in 1989 and the start of the New in 2005). Officially, the BBC holds no canon of *Doctor Who*, meaning that any professional text created of *Doctor Who* material *might* be considered official (such as the Big Finish audio adventures), but also that any text might *not* be considered official. Canonicity matters not because there is a right or a wrong answer, but because determining “canon” means determining what the individual fan thinks is part of the *Doctor Who* universe.

The TVM was situated in a nebulous region of this canonicity debate because it has some characteristics of the Classic series but also diverges from the Classic in major ways. From a production point of view, the TVM was not made solely by the BBC—as all the Classic episodes were—but as a co-production between the BBC and American network Fox.

The UK researcher Peter Wright has written about the TVM as an example of American imperialism, particularly because there are aspects of the movie—the character of the Doctor is a more conservative figure rather than a liberatory one, for example—that seem out of step with British sensibilities. Craig Owen Jones argues in his chapter “Life in the Hiatus” that the character of the Master represents a change from the portrayals that came before, as the “macho”, “leather-clad”, and American Eric Roberts “clashes” with the suave and puckish portrayals of Roger Delgado in the 1970s and John Simm in the 2000s (as well as Anthony Ainley in the 1980s). From a textual standpoint, there are also a number of discrepancies: the Seventh Doctor (Sylvester McCoy) has a sonic screwdriver and eats Jelly Babies, aspects of that incarnation that never appeared in the Classic series (although these signifiers help reclaim the movie as semantically connected to the original series). Perhaps most dramatically, there are elements of diegetic history—the story of the Doctor in the universe of *Doctor Who*—that are incompatible with what we know of the character and his story. The most obvious of this, and the one that is probably the focus of most fans’ arguments, is the fact that the Doctor claims to be half human (on his mother’s side) in the TVM. Yikes. Hard to take that one back.

The point here, and the argument that I’ll be making in this chapter, is not that the TVM fits, or does not fit, into the *Doctor Who* canon—an argument can be made either way, but at this point the TARDIS has flown on that discussion. Rather, I’m interested in a more overtly hypothetical argument about the TVM. The fact that the *Doctor Who* TVM was intended as a pilot for an American/British co-production of a new series of *Doctor Who* has been well established by scholars such as David Butler, Peter Wright, Tat Woods, Matt Hills, and Craig Owen Jones. The reasons why that new series never materialized, while the 2005 the new series as we know it today did, are often discussed and debated by *Doctor Who* fan groups and aficionados. This chapter takes a slightly different look at the *Doctor Who* TVM and asks, what if? What if it had been picked up? How would professional *Doctor Who* have

dealt with the early days of the web? What would a late 1990s/early 2000s Fox/BBC co-production have looked like?

Thus, I want to use a historical view of American television at the cusp of what television scholar Jason Mittell calls “complex television” to examine how a 1990s *Doctor Who* might have been uniquely *Doctor Who* while differing greatly from what it ended up becoming. I discuss the intersection of story arcs and “monster-of-the-week” episodes within the series, the use of “stunt casting” as a way of generating ratings (something both the Classic series and New series of *Doctor Who* have also done), and the influence of 90s television auteurs such as Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and Chris Carter (*The X-Files*) on the series. I uncover aspects of a series that never was, arguing that such an analysis helps us better understand the historical context for the changing media environment at the cusp of the 21st century. Such an analysis may seem superfluous and an experiment in what *Doctor Who* expert and media scholar Matt Hills calls “fanwanking” (inventing context to explain gaps in cult television) (*Triumph of a Time Lord* 58), but I believe there is value in exploring what might have been: it not only helps us better understand the role the *Doctor Who* plays in our contemporary media landscape through a comparison to the past, but it also helps us develop greater historical context for the television we watch today.

First, let’s look at what Jason Mittell calls complex television, and how the 1990s prefigured much of the long-term stories that we see today (including *Doctor Who*). For Mittell, a complex television series narrative includes both *serialized* elements (that is, parts of the story that extend beyond the episode and link up to create story *arcs*) and *episodic* elements (that is, stories that begin and conclude in the same episode). So, for example, in a quintessential 1990s narratively complex television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, almost every episode had a stand-alone plot: a monster-of-the-week against which Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) and her Scooby gang would battle. In the classic episode “Hush” (4.10),

the Gentlemen appeared at the start, and by the end, the team figured out how to defeat the wordless villains and regained control of Sunnydale. The Gentlemen were single-episode villains, never heard from (if you will forgive the pun) again. But there were narrative elements of “Hush” that continued past the end of the episode: Xander (Nicholas Brendon) and Anya’s (Emma Caulfield) relationship troubles, Spike’s (James Marsters) ongoing tiff with Giles (Anthony Stewart Head), Buffy and Riley’s (Marc Blucas) romance, Willow (Alyson Hannigan) and Tara’s (Amber Benson) burgeoning relationship, and even the growth of Willow’s magical powers.

The fact that television was becoming more complex during the 1990s is an important element of the growing narrative complexity within the American television landscape. *Buffy* is not the only show that featured narrative complexity; shows as different as *The X-Files*, *The West Wing*, *ER*, *Dawson’s Creek*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess* embraced this narrative model. Most often, the episodic narrative was heavily *plot*-centric (with a typical Aristotelian beginning—middle—end structure) while the arc narrative was heavily *relationship*-centric (with ongoing relationships taking a more soap-opera-like structure).

So what would a *Doctor Who* television series that started in 1997 have looked like? Given that at the end of the episode the Doctor left proto-companion Grace (Daphne Ashbrook) and anti-companion Chang Lee (Yee Jee Tso) back on Earth, one might imagine that their stories were completed, and from a relationship standpoint, their story arcs wouldn’t have continued. In the Classic series, this would certainly have been true: with the exception of only a few companions (e.g., the Brigadier [Nicholas Courtney], Tegan Jovanka [Janet Fielding]), once a companion was gone, they were gone. In the New series, however, this has not been the case. The Doctor has (re)visited almost all of his companions, including Rose Tyler (Billie Piper), Mickey Smith (Noel Clark), Martha Jones (Freema Agyeman), Donna Noble (Catherine

Tate), Sarah Jane Smith (Elisabeth Sladen), Jack Harkness (John Barrowman), Amy Pond (Karen Gillian), and Clara Oswald (Jenna Coleman).

In other television from the 1990s, characters that disappeared in one season might come back in others. Although *The West Wing* fans created the tongue-in-cheek Mandyville—a place where characters disappeared to when actors left in between series, named after Mandy Hampton (Moira Kelly)—many series did feature characters returning. In *Buffy*, Jonathan (Danny Strong) was a minor character during the series' high school years, who came back in later seasons as a pseudo-villain. In *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *Babylon Five*, many minor characters from early seasons came back in later seasons to play ever-deepening roles as the narrative complexity and character relationships expanded.

It's not too much of a stretch then, to see Grace (and possibly even Chang Lee) returning in later episodes. Perhaps the Eighth Doctor returns to Earth (he always comes back to Earth, after all) and looks her up. There were numerous textual moments when the character's future was mentioned, as when Grace asks him “what will I become”? and the Doctor is hesitant to answer. Perhaps these small, throwaway lines from the TVM would have become narrative elements later in the series. Perhaps Grace would have been a guest in the finale?

Other narrative elements may have continued throughout. For example, the Master is thrown into the Eye of Harmony (inexplicably inside the Doctor's TARDIS—an element touched on in the New series' episode “Journey to the Centre of the TARDIS” 33.10) but obviously survives; the Master always survives. It is not too much of a stretch to imagine that the “big bad” villain for season one of a 1990s *Doctor Who* series would be a recurring Master; perhaps in a *Prisoner*-like twist, the Master would be played by a different actor each time. Other story arcs would be foregrounded as well. Neil Perryman calls the “repeated meme” of the New series of *Doctor Who* (mentions of Bad Wolf in series 1 [27],

Torchwood in series 2 [28], or Vote Saxon in series 3 [29] [as well as in *Torchwood* series 1]) as an integral part of the New series. Indeed, the title of this chapter, “Seeing patterns in things that aren’t there”, is a reference both to the moment the Doctor tells Grace about his alien biology, and the way *Doctor Who* has come to emphasize its narrative arcs. A 1990s *Doctor Who* might have had its own set of “repeated memes”: perhaps the Daleks would have returned in force and Skaro, mentioned briefly at the start of the TVM, would have been the site of the final battle. Perhaps the Eye of Harmony would return in more than one location, signaling a return of the Time Lords.

However, I think the “repeated meme” of the TVM is more subtle; in a 1990s *Doctor Who* TV series, we would have seen an emphasis on the infamous “Who! AM! I!” scene: the Doctor’s exploration of his self.⁵ Given that the new series would have been a co-production between the US and the UK, and that it would have attempted to introduce the character and the show to a broader American audience (never mind that there had been a strong US fan base for many years), the Doctor’s search for a self would be an ongoing narrative focus. Peter Wright argued that the TVM was heavy-handed in its approach to the narrative of the Doctor, telling us diegetic facts throughout to emphasize his history. This probably would have continued in a narratively complex way, as characters from the Doctor’s past would appear to develop the ongoing, serialized narrative arc of the main character’s history.

A second aspect of a hypothetical 1990s television movie is, I think, an emphasis on stunt casting. As previously mentioned, the *Doctor Who* TVM was made for a largely American audience, unfamiliar with *Doctor Who*. Thus, while inconsistencies crept in, largely semantic moments cohered the movie to the larger *Doctor Who* corpus. With only perhaps the exception of Eric Roberts, an American actor who had largely been in television films and series and would have been recognizable to an American audience, none of the other actors would have been necessarily celebrities in the States. While McGann had a star

persona in the UK given his work in the cult film *Withnail and I* and in the 1986 serial *The Monocled Mutineer*, he was relatively unknown in the States, especially compared to the other members of the mid- to late '90s so-called "BritPack," such as Tim Roth, Gary Oldman, and Colin Firth.

In order to garner the type of star appeal that would help generate ratings in the US, a necessity in the US system in the 1990s at a time when cable and premium channels were fragmenting the audience into more niches, I believe a 1990s *Doctor Who* series would have used more celebrity casting to increase viewership. Although Grace may have made an appearance or two in the first season, the companion would likely have been a relatively famous person (not unlike the 2005 New series, which cast pop star Billie Piper with Christopher Eccleston's Ninth Doctor). It wouldn't be a stretch to imagine Jennifer Aniston taking the role (*Friends* was in its third season in 1997, the year the *Doctor Who* TV Series would have premiered) as a way of moving away from her comic persona and avoiding typecasting. Perhaps in a move away from the cinema, someone like Meg Ryan or Sandra Bullock might have taken on the action-oriented role of the companion. Or, in a casting coup, perhaps Drew Barrymore or Winona Ryder would have brought a more manic or dark (respectively) contrast to the role. Or, if the series were to be relevant in a 1990s, more racially aware world, then perhaps the first companion of color would have been cast, like Lisa Bonet (known primarily for *The Cosby Show* at that point), who didn't appear in much in the 1990s anyway and might have wanted to make a career move.

As mentioned earlier, stunt casting might have also applied to the villain, especially in an avant-garde way, if the Doctor was to face multiple version of the Master throughout the series. In *The Prisoner*, the 1960s television series starring Patrick McGoohan, the villain each week was the mysterious Number Two—but each Number Two was played by a different actor/actress (and was a different character, the number

representing more of a signification than a singular character). Although the Master has only 12 regenerations, like the Doctor, the TVM makes it clear that he can steal bodies, so perhaps he could steal the bodies of Will Smith, Robin Williams, Sean Penn, or Ben Affleck?

Finally, the 1990s were a moment in television history when the rise of the TV auteur, as David Lavery calls it, became cemented, and the production role of the “showrunner”—someone who serves as both executive producer and script editor—became formalized. I’ve already mentioned *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the role of Joss Whedon in creating the concept of a celebrity showrunner, but others appeared in the 1990s as well: Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*, *Sports Night*), David Lynch (*Twin Peaks*), David E. Kelley (*L.A. Law*, *The Practice*, and *Ally McBeal*, among others) and Chris Carter (*The X-Files*, *Millennium*) are perhaps the 4 best known. While I suspect that the *Doctor Who* TVM would not have gone in the direction of Lynch into a *Twin Peaks*-esque dream-like fantasy series (although imagine the possibilities: a dancing, backwards-talking Bannakaffalatta (Jimmy Vee)? [30.0]), I do see some common threads with Carter’s *X-Files*, especially in the way the Carter focuses his complex narrative on underlying mythology and well-drawn characters.

Given this, is it hard to see how a *Doctor Who* series circa 1997 would have unfolded like *The X-Files*? Certainly, the connection has been made before: British television scholar David Butler has argued that the TVM “goes out of its way to explain *Doctor Who*’s strangeness through familiar models (incorporating elements... from *The X-Files*...),” (“How to Pilot...” 28) among others. *The X-Files* has a template for television construction that fits the complex narrative hinted at by the TVM: an underlying mythology that unfolds gradually, revealing conspiracy amid the episodes. The hints at a larger universe in the TVM include such questions as the Daleks putting the Master on trial (why would the Daleks do this? It’s against their nature—and how did they catch the Master? What crime did he commit?), the disappearance of companion

Ace (where did she go? Why did the Seventh Doctor redecorate the TARDIS?), or even the unthinkable, why does the Doctor say he's half human? (Is he lying? It is the truth? Is it a process of the regeneration?). The answers to such questions could lead the Doctor in a 1990s-style exploration of the world while also focusing on the episodic elements—villains to be defeated and worlds to explore.

The X-Files serves as a template for what a *Doctor Who* series in the '90s might have looked like as well: well-drawn characters that hint at relationships. It is well-known that the TVM is the first time the Doctor kisses a companion (it is a relatively chaste kiss, but a kiss on the lips nevertheless). This flies in the face of 26 years of an asexual Doctor and a “no hanky-panky in the TARDIS” rule. (The New series, however, has kissing galore.) Given *The X-Files*'s will-they/won't-they narrative of Mulder (David Duchovney) and Scully (Gillian Anderson) throughout its run—the emphasis on which helped the fan groups coin the word “ship” to describe fan work that posits a *relationship* between the characters—it wouldn't be a surprise if a 1990s *Doctor Who* series followed a similar model; an evolutionary step between the chaste kiss in the TVM and the full-on snogging in the New series. Will Paul McGann kiss Tori Spelling as a companion in the Steampunk TARDIS? Surely a question you were dying to ask.

Although this chapter has been a bit of a hypothetical leap, I think that focusing on what a *Doctor Who* series in the 1990s would have looked like is useful. Given the generic, production, and narrative changes happening in US television at the time, I think it would have looked a bit like a crossover between *Buffy* and *X-Files* with some well-known guest stars. In some ways, perhaps I'm just “seeing patterns in things that aren't there”, but in others, perhaps I'm putting together a missing link.

⁴ *Doctor Who: The Television Movie*.

⁵ The new series has taken a similar approach; “The Christmas Invasion” (28.0) and “The Eleventh Hour” (31.1) serve as introductory episodes for new incarnations; season 8 (35) is a

series-long exploration of the Doctor's identity.

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