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Time and Relative Dimensions in Culture: A Cultural Analysis of Doctor Who

Since the dawn of human language, humanity has been telling stories. From the very first story to the ones being told now, humanity has used them to create paper trails of culture that give us clues about the values of a society and its people, and how those values have persisted or changed as society evolved. Paper stories, like books and poetry, are stagnant, once they are written down the pieces of culture placed within them stay the same. To see how a culture has changed, or how global culture has changed in comparison, one must compare stories from the past with more recent stories. However, that changed when stories came on the small screen. TV shows are a useful way of seeing how culture has changed over time. Not only do they act as time capsules, but since most TV programs run for at least four years, they allow us to see a gradual shift in culture. One show is particularly good at acting as a way to see the cultural evolution of a society, and that is the longest running science fiction TV series, *Doctor Who*. *Doctor Who*'s longevity has allowed the show to adapt and change with the British culture that produced it, and by examining key points in the shows history one can see how British culture has changed by examining how the show has adapted to new ideas and theories. *Doctor Who* has been able to survive for sixty plus years because it adapts to the changing British culture by slowly but surely embracing leftist ideas and inclusivity, while also using those ideas to change British culture.

Doctor Who was doomed to fail from the start because it was run by a diverse crew in an age where British television was dominated by white British males. At a fan event Waris Hussein, the first director of *Doctor Who* and the BBC's first Indian director, explained his involvement with the show's origins. It is this explanation that made the fans at the event realize how unconventional of a show *Doctor Who* was in the 1960s. In an era where British television was run by white British males it is strange that *Doctor Who*'s "...creator, Newman, was a Canadian, its first producer, Lambert, a woman, and its first director, Hussein, an Indian," (Herman). The three people in charge of bringing the show to life were outcasts in the culture of the field they were working in. This makes *Doctor Who* a show that had obstacles thrown in its way just because the people working on it were others in 1960s Britain. However, it is the adversity Newman, Lambert, and Hussein faced that allowed *Doctor Who* to be the ever-adapting spectacle it is now.

Doctor Who's creator Sydney Newman, faced push back when pitching the show due to his unconventional ideas on how to run it, and his not being British. Sydney Newman is credited as creating *Doctor Who*, in reality all he did was come up and pitch the original idea. According to the CBC's website, Newman was one of the first non-British heads of drama at the BBC. He pitched the idea of *Doctor Who* because he noticed a hole between two programs in the Saturday evening broadcast block. He pitched *Doctor Who* as a program targeted mainly at children so that it would fit between adult oriented and teenage oriented programming. However, because Newman was not from the U.K., he immediately faced pushback when trying to get his idea off the ground, ("Sydney Newman"). According to Toronto based Historian Adam Bunch, Sydney Newman was born during the first world war to parents from Russia. During the rise of the CBC in the 1940s, Newman was sent to New York to observe how American TV stations operated. In

America he learned the ins and outs of television, and how to make documentaries. The most important thing Newman learned was how to put together a good production crew. That is how he ended up creating *Flight into Danger*, which became such an international hit that one of the BBC's competitors, ABC, hired him and moved him to England. Initially Newman did not like what he saw on British TVS, as most of the programs were television plays adapting classic English literature. His lack of amusement with the nationalism on British television would both be a weakness and a strength, (Bunch). During the time Newman was in England the cold war had started, and in many countries around the world nationalism began to spike. According to Benedict Anderson, nationalism creates an identity for a group of people to unite under. However, since nationalism is imagined its rules can be changed to exclude certain peoples and create a culture that is defined by determining what it is not, (Anderson 256-262). Newman experienced this by being Canadian in Britain during a period of Britain for the British, and by being of Russian decent in a Western country during the cold war, according to Bunch. It is this same nationalism that allowed Newman to rise to power in the British TV world. In utilizing the fear of Russians in the cold war, Newman created a spy drama that spoke to cold war fears and earned him the status of British. Seeing his success at the ABC, the BBC then hired Newman as their head of Drama, wanting to capitalize on his adventurous spirit. (Bunch). It is here where Newman would begin to change British culture with the creation of *Doctor Who*.

Newman would change British culture with *Doctor Who*, not just because he was the first Canadian to be head of drama at the BBC, but because of his unconventional hiring tropes. As mentioned earlier, Newman learned how to build a good production team for a show. According to Bunch, Newman's first challenge as head of drama for the BBC was finding a show to slot in the Saturday afternoon TV slot. Before this slot the adult-oriented sports show, *Grandstand*

would air, and after the slot the teen-oriented music show *Juke Box Jury*. In this middle slot the BBC was airing adaptations of classic novels, something Newman hated. He pitched the idea of a children-oriented science fiction program, that would both teach kids and provide the whole family with fun adventures. Newman workshopped some ideas, but ran with one that was a modification of a show he worked on in Canada called Mr. X. The idea of this modification was an old man that would travel around the universe in a ship that was bigger on the inside. Audiences would know nothing of this character's origins and he would be untrustworthy, yet one could put their lives in his hands. The idea for *Doctor Who* was born, but Newman would see pushback on his idea for hiring a woman, Verity Lambert, to be head producer of the show, and hiring an Indian man, Waris Hussein, to direct its first story, (Bunch). The BBC would work against Hussein and Lambert, and even questioned Newman's choices in hiring them, as they were unconventional hires at the time and the BBC thought a woman and an Indian were not cut out for television work. However, Lambert and Hussein would show why they had Newman's faith.

A change in British culture occurred when Sydney Newman brought Verity Lambert and Waris Hussein on as leaders of the shows production. Those two being hired were a needed step forward in both racial and gender equality. Britain in the 1960s was not very kind to women or Indians, including in the television landscape. According to Kelly Hankin, women are underappreciated in film and television. In more recent times women are still paid less than male, directors, performers, or producers, for the same quality of work. They are also often put under stricter standards designed to make them fail. This was even worse when *Doctor Who* was first put into production in the 1960s. Verity Lambert was brought into the world of television at a time when women were still expected to play the mom role and were not expected to have the

creative capacity to go far in the production side of film and television. Women that were able to get jobs in television production had much at stake, (Hankin 59-63). Verity Lambert had a lot at stake in producing *Doctor Who* because Sydney Newman was the only man that would hire her. Newman is also one of the only people who had faith in Waris Hussein, the first director of *Doctor Who* and the BBC's first Indian director. Hussein was apart of a group that dealt with a lot of adversity in the U.K. Historically the U.K. has dealt with an issue best described as Britain for the British. According to Akala, the United Kingdom has a history of passing anti human laws to keep Britain white, or for the "British." Their concept of nationality comes from the legend of King Arthur, in which Arthur defends the Britons from the Saxons. The British like to imagine they are the descendants of Arthur's people, when they are the descendants of the invading Saxons. This British fantasy of being the descendants of Britain's that are defending their homeland from invaders has allowed the British to create xenophobic isolationist policies. In these policies they define British as white and not British as everything else. This mentality was especially rampant in post World War Britain., (Akala 18-21). In post World War Britain Indians suffered quite a bit. Marcus Collins explains that following the apartheid of India and Pakistan a mass migration of West Indians came into Britain. During this time the Britain for the British narrative that took from Arthurian Legend, had labeled the Indians as their Saxons. Any Indian in Britain, whether they were born in the U.K. or not, was labeled an enemy that should be pushed out. This made it difficult for many Indians to live safely and even get jobs, (Collins 391-340). Being one of these Indians Hussein faced adversity in the BBC, and paired with Lambert, a woman and an Indian in the British TV world has almost no chance of success, but they succeeded anyways.

The team of Sydney Newman, Verity Lambert, and Waris Hussein, made television

history by making *Doctor Who* a success through appeal to the everyman. Bunch states that no matter how wild the show's concept got Newman wanted it to remain grounded in education and required the Doctor's companions to be everyday people so they could learn from the Doctor. The Doctor himself is meant to be an unimportant wanderer who happens to be a genius. The entire show is structured around unimportant everyday people, which is what allowed it to adapt to changing cultures, as its characters could constantly change if they remained nobodies. Themes of importance being unimportant is what made *Doctor Who* resonate with audiences as Western societies love the idea of anyone being able to be anything. This is the life of blood of *Doctor Who* because Sydney Newman hiring Lambert and Hussein allowed to nobodies with the odds stacked against them to become two of the most important people in television history. Where Lambert and Hussein would have been given no chance, Newman gave them two. In the filming of the pilot version of "An Unearthly Child," things went so wrong that even Newman said the episode was terrible. In an age where reshoots are uncommon, instead of firing them, Newman told Hussein and Lambert to reshoot the episode because he knew if he did not give them that second chance British society would justify the groups Lambert and Hussein belonged to being excluded from television. Hussein and Lambert worked together to reshoot the first episode and created a cultural phenomenon, (Bunch). The shows rough start and its production team's ability to adapt to whatever challenges and adversity came their way is what allowed *Doctor Who* to evolve alongside British culture.

Doctor Who has been able to survive for sixty plus years because it has changed alongside British society. According to *Peabody* since its inception, *Doctor Who* has reflected cultural changes, fears and anxieties, while evening challenging the common culture. The very people behind the show being behind the show made it a challenge to common culture from the moment

the first script was drafted, (“Fifty Years of Doctor Who”). *Doctor Who* has often acted as a counter public for those who do not agree with the opinions of the contemporary public spheres. Nancy Fraser explains that public spheres are conceptualized as the middle ground between the state and the people. Usually consisting of a small select group that determines what the interests of the people are and relays it to the state which will then become the regulations of how society functions. The issue with this concept is the interests of the individuals in the public sphere being conflated with the interests of everyone. Public spheres often create a society in which at least one group is excluded. The idea of the counter sphere helps solve this problem as it creates multiple public spheres that spread multiple ideas, that often counter the harmful ideas of the main public spheres, (Fraser 57-63). *Doctor Who* can be viewed as catalyst for counter publics because it provides where new ideas can emerge that help counter the harmful ones of the public sphere, also contributing to its longevity.

Doctor Who’s longevity is often contributed to its willingness to adapt with the times and incorporate new ideas. According to *Peabody Doctor Who*’ willingness to adapt to change allows the show to refresh itself every few years with a new cast and production team with ideas more fitting with the times. While the show started out as an educational children’s show, its second story, “The Daleks,” reflects fears of the Cold War rooted in colonial nationalism. The story takes place on a planet ravaged by nuclear war, ruled by a race that resembles the Nazi armies. The show’s politics were often held back by the very culture it would change, as the earlier episodes of the classic era of the show were more rooted in colonial neoliberalism. As the show progressed it got more overtly political, and leftist. From the third Doctor’s era tackling environmental issues, shaming British colonialism, and subtly dealing with issues of race and the Britain for the British mentality, all the way to the sixth and seventh Doctors dealing with the

issues of moral philosophy in a world that does not allow it, and the rich aristocrats that would rather watch the world burn instead of act. *Doctor Who* has been slowly changing to accommodate new views and ideas on culture, (*Peabody*). However, the classic era of the show, lasting from 1963 to 1989, primarily focused on British culture, while the modern era of the show, lasting from 2005 to the present, has gone global.

Doctor Who, in its modern incarnation, has been dealing with culture on a global scale, while still being based in British culture. According to Alec Charles, *Doctor Who* has become more globally oriented because it is dealing with a post 9/11 world, rather than a post war world. Instead of having to grapple with Britain's effect on the rest of the world, *Doctor Who* now must grapple with the effects of the rest of the world on Britain. Taking this more globalist approach, doctor who is able to tell more inclusive stories, but it is still bound to the culture that produced to it. Many of these stories come from the West's fear of terror in the East. However, the show is able to turn this on its head in the episodes "Utopia, Sound of Drums, and Last of the Timelords" which showcases humanities thirst for taking up more space is so vast that they would go back in time and kill their ancestors to make a past earth their new home. This initially play's into Western fears of terror in the East by being about a group of people barely holding themselves together wreaking havoc on the people living nicer lives, and then turns into a commentary on global expansion by turning around and saying the people causing the terror is all of humanity, (Charles 450-462). While *Doctor Who* can offer counter publics and flipping cultural norms, like terror in the East fears caused by orientalism on their head, the show is still bound to the British culture that has produced it and has some deep-rooted orientalism.

Doctor Who has aspects of Orientalism rooted deep within the show. Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, is the Western tendency to other the east and make it everything the

west is not. This allows Western cultures to treat Eastern cultures like they are savage and inhumane. Using orientalism, the West can dismiss the East and make it into something it is not, (Said 1-15). Unfortunately, this can be seen in *Doctor Who*, with its tendency to make east and southeast Asians villains or characters that need to be freed. The blatant Orientalism of *Doctor Who* can be seen in classic stories like, “The Mind of Evil,” where an adult Chinese woman is constantly referred to like she is a little kid and is made a victim of the Master’s that needs to be freed. It can also be seen in modern stories, like turn left, where the villain is an evil mystical woman surrounding by Asian iconography and is most likely Asian herself. Despite being rooted in inclusivity, *Doctor Who* is still rooted in British society, and will always have some connection to British colonialism.

Doctor Who’s links to British colonialism can often create a skewed view of history when exploring its time travel aspect. According to Jolie C. Mathews, historical narratives can be used to disrupt or encourage dominant historical narratives. If the U.S. government wants its citizens to think that the genocide of Native Americans was justified then it will produce historical films and shows that show the Native Americans as villains, thus supporting a dominant narrative. Time travel media is especially bad at upholding dominant narrative through the uplifting of historical figures that were not all good, (Mathews 76-80). *Doctor Who* is unfortunately not an exception to this, as it has many episodes that simplify history and make figures that were not all good, all good. For example, the series 5 (2005 show) episode “Victory of the Daleks,” plays into the British trope of worshipping Winston Churchill like he did no wrong. This upholds the common narrative that Churchill was a hero through and through, even if that is not true. As the show has gone on, it has matured, and later episodes like “The Witchfinders” dismantle a common narrative. In “The Witchfinders,” instead of displaying King James I as heroic, they

make him into a character that is tragic, but foolish. He is not necessarily evil, but he is dumb. This reflects British culture's growth as it is slowly starting to accept the nuances and grey areas of history. As a show and cultural object *Doctor Who* is growing and maturing.

As a reflection of culture *Doctor Who* is growing and changing, incorporating multiple themes and ideas from many different viewpoints to create a sense that modern British culture is slowly changing for the better. Susana Loza explains, that while *Doctor Who* still upholds British colonialism in some ways it also admonishes it in others. In the episode "Planet of the Ood," the titular Ood are used as stand ins for all the non-white races Britain has forced into servitude. The Ood are shown holding tea while asking if their masters want sugar. The tea invokes the East India company while the sugar invokes the sugar plantations run by slaves. In the episode we are told the Ood were born to serve humanity. This seems to uphold ideas of white saviorism and racial inferiority, as the Ood being enslaved is presented as humanity saving them. Later on in the episode it is revealed the Ood are lobotomized and want to be free. The episode ends with the Doctor aiding in freeing the Ood, but then leaving them to build their own society as he does not have the authority to tell them how to operate. This shows a disdain towards British colonialism and meddling in the affairs of the nations, as the message of the episode is the Ood, who represent non-white races, are people and thus have a right to free will and self-government, (Loza 132-147). This is a sign of *Doctor Who* growing with the times and adjusting with the culture, as instead of colonialism being bad being a counter sphere to be subtly addressed, it is now a public sphere that is front and center. There are other new ideas the show has incorporated in its recent sixtieth anniversary specials. According to John Christman, *Doctor Who* actively restores the humanity of those society tends to dehumanize and other. In the episode "The Star Beast," the Doctor faces monsters that are big bugs. In the classic series the bugs would have

been the villains, but instead the cute fuzzy creature they were shooting at is the villain of the episode. This is a subtle commentary on racism and how the races shown as innocent are the ones that are evil because of how they harm the other races by painting them as evil. The episode features a trans character and a disabled character and puts the fact that they are human beings above the categories they fit into. *Doctor Who* is becoming more inclusivity as the culture around it becomes more inclusive, (Christman 36-37).

Doctor Who owes its longevity to its ability to change and to be changed by the British culture surrounding it. Through the first woman producer and Indian director at the BBC being hired to produce the show, a positive change was able to be set in motion in both the company and British culture. It is these small positive changes to the culture around it that allow *Doctor Who* to slowly incorporate more inclusive ideas. In recent years a black man has played the titular role that normally belongs to white people, and the Doctor has been allowed to express homosexuality. By looking through the sixty years of *Doctor Who* we can see how common culture has slowly but surely changed, and maybe even a little for the better.

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