Doctor Who at the half-century mark: A brief assessment

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The much-anticipated 50th anniversary episode of the science fiction television series *Doctor Who* was broadcast November 23 in 94 countries simultaneously. As part of the release, the episode had a 3D theatrical showing in select cities across the globe.

Doctor Who follows the adventurers of a time-traveling alien known as "The Doctor" and his human companions as they travel through time and space, encounter various beings and meet historical personages. It originally aired on the BBC from 1963 to 1989 (the first episode was broadcast the day after John F. Kennedy's assassination) and was subsequently relaunched in 2005.

Since its revival, the show has received far greater international attention, especially in the US. It is now the number-one-rated program on BBC America, undoubtedly bringing in considerable revenue. An average of 77 million viewers worldwide watch each episode.

The Doctor has the ability to "regenerate" after suffering a fatal injury, which results in a changed appearance, and has now been played by 12 different actors. The character has been portrayed in the new series by Christopher Eccleston, David Tennant and Matt Smith. Peter Capaldi will be assuming the role during this year's Christmas special.

As this is the show's half-century mark, an assessment seems appropriate.

Certain themes recur in the series, particularly in the years since 2005: What is it to be human? How is this affected by technology? How far should one go in fighting an enemy? Who or what is "the enemy"?

At the heart of the series seems to be the notion that every aspect of humanity is worth knowing and fighting for. The Doctor is the last known survivor of the cataclysmic Time Wars—a conflict between his people (the Time Lords) and a bio-mechanical race known as the Daleks. He could go everywhere and to "anywhen" (any time) in the Universe, yet chooses Earth as his home and has played the part of its guardian against various invaders, sending the would-be conquerors back into space with a warning that, as Tennant's Doctor declared, "When you talk of the Earth…it is defended!"

The Doctor is attracted to humans from ordinary working class backgrounds. The companions of the rebooted series include Rose (Billie Piper), a shop girl from a council flat; Martha (Freema Agyeman), a medical student; Donna (Catherine Tate), an administrative temp; Amy (Karen Gillan), an odd-jobber; Rory (Arthur Darvill), a nurse; and Clara (Jenna Coleman), a governess. The Doctor travels with them through time and space. Their various skills—ones that many audience members also possess—are cleverly and realistically employed to solve problems.

While the new series is somewhat darker in tone than the old one (*Doctor Who* was conceived as a show for children), it still retains a sense of joy, wonder and curiosity about life that made the original series so enjoyable. The monsters that The Doctor and his companions must overcome are not simply phenomena to be obliterated, but understood. One particularly touching example occurred during Tennant's tenure, in the episode "Fear Her" (2006), in which an alien force is trapping people inside of drawings. Instead of simply killing the creature, called an Isolus, The Doctor and Rose come to understand they are dealing with a lonely child who uses the drawings as a desperate way of breaking its solitude.

The series has even expressed sympathy for the Daleks, the sworn enemies of The Doctor. Such an attitude toward alien life is refreshing in contrast to

television shows and movies that predominantly view non-Earth creatures as beings to be feared and killed at all costs.

The Doctor and his companions have also had adventures involving various cultural icons, including Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie, William Shakespeare and Vincent van Gogh. However, episodes in which past political figures—such as Winston Churchill in "Victory of the Daleks" (2010)—are represented tend to be far less satisfying, in large part due to the program's nationalistic outlook and loose treatment of history.

With some sensitivity and complexity, *Doctor Who* has explored the cruelty of slavery ("Planet of the Ood," 2008), the exploitation of labor ("The Rebel Flesh," 2011), the ability and willingness of the media to control information ("The Long Game," 2006) and the internment of immigrants ("Turn Left," 2008), even if it offers rather naïve solutions to the various social ills.

The show speaks to a generally positive view of humanity's future. Starting with Eccleston's incarnation in the first revived season in 2005, we see that the species survives the death of the Sun. Episodes with Tennant as The Doctor (2005-2010) reveal that humans still exist 10 trillion years in the future when all the stars have burned out. All of this, it should be noted, is not done through magic or mysticism, but with an undisguised admiration for the human determination to understand, struggle with and master the world and nature through technological advances.

There has been, however, a troubling increase in militarism, especially by the seventh year of the reboot. In pursuit of information regarding a kidnapped companion's whereabouts, Matt Smith's Doctor (2010-2013) destroys a whole fleet of ships of Cybermen—beings who contain human brains as a means of "upgrading" their fragile bodies. To rescue this companion, The Doctor rounds up those who owe him favors to form a private army (in an episode significantly entitled "A Good Man Goes to War," 2011). Since The Doctor can zip in and around the universe just as he pleases, why the need for an army?

UNIT, a military organization that combats extraterrestrial threats to the Earth, has been a part of the program from the beginning. In the original, while The Doctor sometimes worked with UNIT as a consultant, it was always on his own terms and with a skeptical eye toward weaponry. Over the course of the new series, UNIT has become something more threatening and nefarious, and The Doctor has become more willing to work with this body.

In *Torchwood*, the *Doctor Who* spinoff that first aired in 2006, that militarism has been extended into domestic spying. The ability to tap into any closed circuit television camera, hack computer systems and obtain personal data is presented as something the "good guys" routinely resort to. There is also an instance in *Torchwood* ("Countrycide," 2006) in which torture is portrayed as a legitimate way of getting information.

At a time when US and British authorities have turned to illegal drone assassinations, mass domestic spying and a policy of unending war, it is perhaps not surprising that *Doctor Who* reflects these trends. However, that is no excuse, especially for a series that has traditionally expressed a general disdain for the military.

In the 50th anniversary episode ("The Day of the Doctor"), The Doctor does not allow UNIT to detonate a nuclear device in the heart of London to stop an alien incursion. Instead, he forces the humans and aliens to reach a truce with no loss of life. One hopes this marks a conscious and lasting return to the theme of the triumph of intellect over brute force—a notion that has helped the program build a devoted following over the course of decades.

Through The Doctor, viewers glimpse people at their best and worst. The contradictory nature of modern society—with its beauties and horrors—is examined with a degree of empathy and subtlety. While its approach and execution are sometimes flawed, *Doctor Who* champions, from the perspective of an outsider, the greatness that humanity can and should aspire to.