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'Adapting Telefantasy: The *Doctor Who* and the Daleks Films'

John R. Cook

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[The] first appearance of the Daleks became a phenomenon, changing the whole course of *Doctor Who*. Something about these metal monsters clicked with the general public at the time. [...] Despite being precisely the 'bug-eyed monsters' he had wished to avoid, the Daleks ensured the success of [Sydney] Newman's original commissioning goal for *Doctor Who*: ... attracting eight- to fourteen-year-olds to BBC-1 but at the same time, by not 'talking down' to its audience, it did not alienate elder siblings and parents while they waited for the later programmes.

While the ... *Doctor Who and the Daleks* film is essentially a remake of Nation's 'The Mutants', some of the key revisions and abridgements which [Milton] Subotsky made to the original provide crucial clues as to his intentions for the film, as well as his perceptions of where its audience might lie. Together these offer a telling illustration of some of the widespread assumptions about what was deemed commercially possible for British science fiction in the cinema during this period as opposed to on television. If the BBC and Sydney Newman saw the *Doctor Who* concept as a means of fulfilling a public service remit by 'reaching across' to as wide a cross-section of the audience as possible, in the cinema, Subotsky perceived his best hopes lay in refashioning it into a vehicle specially 'niche-marketed' for children. In this way, *Doctor Who and the Daleks* irons out much of the adult content that might be thought 'troublesome' for children.

Right from the start, Subotsky's version of *Doctor Who* makes a direct equation between science fiction and the 'magical' world of the child's imagination.¹ [...] When [the Doctor] pits himself against the machine-like Daleks, his is the old romantic image of the 'good scientist': the quirky, enquiring, free spirit committed to science as a means of individual emancipation and progress versus the more modernist image of science gone wrong in the form of the coldly rational, dehumanizing Daleks. In short: 'good' science as old-fashioned magic versus 'bad' science as

new-fangled terror.

Compared to the dream of science as the progress of humanity embodied by the Doctor, [the Daleks] represent the corresponding nightmare vision of science as the road to utter dehumanization. In *Doctor Who and the Daleks*, these two competing visions are well illustrated by the difference between the Daleks and their enemies, the Thals. Borrowing heavily from images of the gentle, surface-dwelling Eloi versus the hideous subterranean Morlocks in *The Time Machine*, the Thals are represented as essentially peace-loving and agrarian. [...] Everyone is accorded the status of an individual and all are in complete harmony with nature. By contrast, in the Daleks, we find creatures that have utterly estranged themselves from the natural world to such an extent that they can no longer survive anywhere other than in special cities constructed entirely of metal. Moreover, they progress through collective, ant-like colonies, in which there are clear lines of structure and hierarchy – a wholly ‘rational’ order – but where any sense of individuality or emotion has been completely expunged. Theirs is the nightmare of urban dehumanization in a mass society.

If this may be one reason why the Daleks achieved such iconic status in the decade of the ‘white heat’ of technology, at the same time, it does not explain why thousands of fans actually loved them [...] The Daleks were so successful not so much because they could be frightening but because they were so easily imitable to an extent that children came to identify with them. [...] Just like children in the exuberance of play, the Daleks really could not ‘help it’ if they did things of which ‘responsible’ human adults often did not approve.

All of this was quite a long way from Terry Nation’s conception in the original TV version of the machine-like Daleks as ‘the ultimate Nazis’ (Howe et al., 1992: 31). Interestingly, however, both films retain the sense, tangible in Nation’s TV plots, of offering a partisan perspective on Britain’s experience in the Second World War. Thus in *Doctor Who and the Daleks*, the inhumane collectivity of the Dalek ‘reich’ is pitted against the brave, plucky Thals who may not have the cold efficiency nor military might of their ruthless opponents but who more than make up for it in their willingness to stand up against all odds in defence of their freedom. There are also echoes of the Holocaust. The Daleks’ war cry is ‘exterminate, exterminate’, while the Thals, at first, resemble the Jews: an innocent ‘wandering tribe’ who are tricked into entering the metal city on the pretext of receiving food, only to be slaughtered en masse by the

Daleks.

*Full-length text, from which the above is an anthologised abridgement, originally published in *British Science Fiction Cinema*, edited by IQ Hunter (London: Routledge, 1999), 113–27.