Television’s Afterlife: Memory, the Museum and Material Culture

The stuff of nightmares, reduced to an exhibit

The first series of the revived British science-fiction programme Doctor Who features an episode simply entitled ‘Dalek’. Rose (Billie Piper) and the Doctor (Christopher Eccleston) encounter a last relic of the Dalek race, the persistent pepper-pot villains believed to have been destroyed in the ‘Time War’, when they are attracted to the underground lair of a billionaire collector of alien artefacts by an anonymous distress signal. It is the opening pre-credit sequence of this episode which is of particular interest as the long-running series self-consciously refers to itself as an object of memory by placing itself in the museum. The opening setting of the episode is an exhibition of alien artefacts housed in large glass cases inside a cavernous hall (see Figure 5.1). Various artefacts from the world of Doctor Who are featured in the mise-en-scène of the museum: something old (a Cyberman’s head, created in 1966), something new (a Slitheen’s claw, 2005 series), something borrowed (a milometer from the Roswell spaceship) and something blue, with the TARDIS similarly placed as an exhibit through the composition of the frame.

First broadcast in 1963 it is the longevity of Doctor Who which has led scholars to respond to the series as a ‘receptacle’ for multiple forms of history, memory and identity. For example, in its changing constructions of ‘British-ness’ and understandings of British social history and memory, the programme ‘provides the cultural historian with a window on the culture that created and embraced it’ (Cull 2001, p. 95), with a key attraction of the show being its ability to ‘map the shifting cultural landscape’ (Chapman 2006, p. 201). The programme might also be utilised to map a shifting television landscape as the new Doctor Who...
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Figure 5.1 The Doctor and Rose in the museum. ‘Dalek’, series 1, episode 6 of the new Doctor Who (dir. Joe Ahearne, prod. BBC Wales, 2005).

self-consciously employs the knowledge of its own status as an iconic television institution. For example, the contents of the exhibition in ‘Dalek’ place the new against the old, inviting comparison particularly on the level of production design and special effects and illuminating how the show is involved in creating as well as prompting television memories. These memories are inevitably tied to experiences of change and continuity, of growing up with Doctor Who and the feelings it might invoke. This emerges as a central theme of the Russell T. Davies era (2005–9), with both storylines and a particular characterisation of the Doctor (as played by Christopher Eccleston and David Tennant) preoccupied with the passing of time, ageing, loss, longing and belonging.3 ‘Dalek’ and other episodes, such as the reunion with former companions Sarah Jane (Elizabeth Sladen) and K-9,4 arguably address those who have grown up with the series and find themselves, as does Sarah Jane, much older on the Doctor’s return, and as the Doctor himself poignantly remarks when he encounters the exhibited head of a Cyberman, ‘I’m getting old’.5

‘Dalek’ is certainly not unique in its use of the museum as a site of drama. In ‘The Space Museum’, a story from the 1965 series starring William Hartnell as the Doctor, the empty shell of a Dalek stands on display, offering a hiding place for the Doctor from the ‘curators’ wishing to turn him into an exhibit himself (see Figure 5.2). In series 5 of the