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Keeping Time in the Indian Ocean: *Doctor Who* on the *SS Bernice*

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to explore the constitution of the Indian Ocean-scape as a temporal object of the program industry with specific interest directed towards the 1973 *Doctor Who* arc titled “Carnival of Monsters” where the Indian Ocean is depicted as both a space and a character, an image that is at the same time real and reel. Questions of the cultural production and dissemination of images of the Indian Ocean, characterizations of marine/oceanic cyberlife in the anthropocene, and the disruption of time and consciousness in the ocean scape will be addressed through an analysis of “Carnival of Monsters”, *Doctor Who*’s self-reflexive, post-modernist episode arc which approaches the phenomenon of television and entertainment critically.

“Carnival of Monsters” becomes a shifting subject between the twin poles of politicization and entertainment, going so far as to complicate the two, and plays the role of both a tertiary retention (as understood in the context of Bernard Stiegler’s reading of and development on the work of Husserl) by virtue of being an industrial temporal object and a variation of the Mary Celeste mystery sparking intersections with the other ocean-centric *Doctor Who* episodes, and other reimaginings in popular culture. The paper, thus, aims to locate its discussion of the Indian Oceanscape in the wider arena of media studies and popular culture, building a theoretical framework from the work of scholars like Bernard Stiegler and Neil Postman to look at temporal objects and the manufacturing of desire, consent and consciousness, in the context of the Indian Oceanscape; to question and challenge the anthropocene and formulate an understanding of the neganthropocene.

Keywords: Science Fiction, Popular Culture, Indian Ocean, *Doctor Who*, time, travel.

“That’s what I am: just a traveller. Imagine it: no tax, no bills, no boss. Just the open sky.”—

The Tenth Doctor, *Doctor Who*, Season 4, Christmas Special.

“People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint, it's more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey stuff.”—The Tenth Doctor, *Doctor Who*, Season 3, Episode 10.

The Indian Ocean-scape in popular culture is one that has a long history of conceptualisation and dissemination, very much like a literary heirloom handed down generation to generation but always worked upon like a tapestry telling a story which is ‘multilogic’ (using the term ‘multilogic’, as an extension of and development of the term ‘dialogic’, specifically in terms of discourse and cultural production) and multicultural. One of the most popular images of the Indian Ocean is in the tales of Sinbad the Sailor, the later 17th-18th century additions to the original *One Thousand and One Nights* manuscript and story-cycles. The tales of Sinbad can be traced, in terms of source material, to Homeric epics, the *Alexander Romance*, the Egyptian “Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor” and Abbasid works detailing lives of Arab mariners. Sinbad travelled, as did other texts under imperialism, and the story is present in the earliest known European translation of the *Nights*, Galland's *Les Mille et une nuits, contes arabes traduits en français* (finished in 1717) of which an English version became available soon. The story and character of Sinbad have undergone several modifications and developments through the years as Sinbad became a familiar icon in popular culture, Western and otherwise. Sinbad has grown into a global but stereotypical traveller-adventurer figure, appearing in adaptations and retellings like *Popeye the Sailor Meets Sindbad the Sailor* (1936), *Sinbad contro i sette saraceni* (1964), *Shehzade Sinbad kaf daginda* (1971), *Doraemon:Nobita's Dorabian Nights* (1991) and *Alif Laila* (1997), to name a few. The way popular images of Sinbad have been produced and shared offer an entry-point, in the context of this paper, into studying the Indian Oceanscape which has similarly undergone appropriations and adaptations in the popular imaginary. Metcalf talks about the rich historiography of the Indian Ocean that fades away with the coming of the colonial era (9). The interest in land, empire and the British Raj in India did not mean that life in the Indian Ocean disappeared or that time stopped in the Indian Ocean. “Flows of people, ideas, and institutions, not to mention a vigorous trade, traversed its waters” and just like the tales of Sinbad, the ‘Indian Ocean’ too travelled across water and reached land and, then, libraries and, with the advancement of technology, media and entertainment, reached print culture, radio and television (9). However, often this new dynamic placed the Indian Oceanscape in pre-made frames, where it functioned as a prop, background scenery and even costume for the adventures of adventurer-travellers that were either neo/colonialist figures or typically occidental figures

that coloured the Ocean with their own character. Twenty-first century depictions of the Indian Ocean are example enough of this history of the Indian Oceanscape that, though not overtly recognized, functions thriving ever the same. In obvious imagery, Captain America rescues the *Lemurian Star* and its Government-employee staff from the perils, a pirate and hostages' situation, which have befallen it, in the Indian Ocean. Black Manta from *Aquaman*, residing 'somewhere' in the Indian Ocean, tests out an experimental weapon that may convert water to plasma. In *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, radioactive kryptonite is found in the Indian Ocean, a relic from *Man of Steel* in which an alien ship lands in the Ocean to investigate it. Already these seemingly disparate images of the Indian Ocean in just the sub-genre of superhero action movies, begins to show a pattern where the oceanscape becomes pivotal in the journey of the adventurer-hero figures who by their, at times accidental but plot-wise necessary, encounters with the Ocean learn something about it and create discourse about it. The IO (henceforth, acronyms like IO, IOscape and IOW have been used to refer to Indian Ocean, Indian Oceanscape and Indian Ocean World for the sake of brevity) is, simultaneously, a place of exploration and experiment undergoing very modern, contemporary crises but also 'alien' exhibiting an intersection of Orientalist remnants and conventions of science-fiction. It is, at the same time, the world of Sinbad and his curious adventurers as of technology and scientific innovations in a planetary post-media understanding. It is enmeshed in its multi-cultural history and historiography as well as popular cultural narratives and often the IO as a subject of analysis loses itself in this web. Studying the IOscape, specifically as its production in the BBC sci-fi TV show *Doctor Who* (1963—present) offers a unique intersection of several of the concerns being discussed here.

The Doctor, an alien from the fictional planet, Gallifrey, travels across space and time in adventures very similar to those of Sinbad. On a side-note, there is, of course, an understanding that a comparison between the Doctor and Sinbad must take into account that despite both being characterised as 'alien', the Doctor is played by an English man, a complexity that is brought into focus when the British colonial, Major Daly, meets this contradictory figure, in this arc. Time for the Doctor is "wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey", fluid and traversable, very much like a huge, spatial waterbody, and he is a traveller who navigates this space while the viewers of the show both consume and participate in discourse production of the various places and peoples the Doctor meets. Perhaps the best instance of this pronounced connection is the episode with the spaceship *Titanic*, built on the model of the Earthian *RMS Titanic*, an inter-galactic tourist vessel that travels its course to give its

passengers an experience of 2008 Christmas. The Doctor's ship, the *TARDIS*, on the other hand, besides being a recurring character and image on the show, is a vessel that uses time like ships use the ocean, there even being several episodes set against oceanic setting that underline the metaphor. The most prominent depiction of the IO in *Doctor Who* takes place in the 1973 "Carnival of Monsters" arc where the Doctor and his companion, Jo Grant, accidentally land on the *SS Bernice*, a ship sailing the Indian Ocean to reach Bombay. This self-reflexive, post-modernist episode arc is of importance to a study of the IOscape because it approaches the IO as a cultural production against the phenomenon of television and entertainment critically.

On June 4th, 1926, the *SS Bernice*, a cargo ship sailing to Bombay, encounters a dinosaur in the Indian Ocean. The camera pans out and the viewers become aware of another screen, that of the 'miniscope', an alien peepshow-television of sorts with proper channels and entertainment programs as the miniscope owner and television show producer, Vorg and his assistant Shirna advertise. The Doctor, inside the miniscope, is shocked by seeing a plesiosaurus emerge out of the Indian Ocean and attack the ship and its crew, including Major Daly, the self-proclaimed scholarly sahib (the episode parodies the 'sahib' figure, referring by way of satire to its roots in colonial interactions with and readings of South Asian social hierarchies; Major Daly's understanding of the 'idle' Madrasis he hasn't interacted with and the seemingly 'English' stowaway he wants to have a cordial drink with because "The fellows a sahib"—also, an 'alien', an Other, so to speak—are very different and entrenched in stereotyping and organisation of power so prevalent in colonial interactions with the Self and the Other), and his daughter, Claire Daly, the only passengers of the cargo ship. Outside the miniscope, the audience comprises of the Inter-minorians (inhabitants of the fictional, alien planet, Inter-Minor), who watch the show—a product of the culture industry—with both fascination and curiosity. The culture industry seeks to convince the viewers that the world they're watching is real (Vorg makes it a point to mention to the Inter-minorian viewers that the program is showing 'real', miniaturized aliens in their 'real' habitat), just as Jo is vehement in convincing the Doctor that they have indeed landed on a real ship in the Indian Ocean despite his frequent denial of it,

DOCTOR: This isn't Earth. It just looks like it

JO: All right, Doctor, I'll convince you.

...

JO: I just want you to admit the truth, that's all. Well, instead of swanning around some distant galaxy, we've slipped back about forty years in time and we're on a little cargo boat in the middle of the Indian Ocean. (10:22-10:26, 11:06-11:16)

Adorno talks about how the “whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry. The familiar experience of the moviegoer, who perceives the street outside as a continuation of the film he has just left, because the film seeks strictly to reproduce the world of everyday perception, has become the guideline of production” (99). For the IOscape, the effects of the culture industry are brought into sharp focus with an awareness of the program industry—radio, television and so on—which, especially, creates industrial temporal objects that “allow for intimate control of individual behaviour, transformed into mass behaviour—while the viewer, isolated in front of his screen, unlike the cinema, maintains the illusion of solitary entertainment” (Stiegler 5). Manufacturing of consent and desire, and consumption, regulate the experience of the IO through media, where the IOscape is pushed into a pseudo-context, that is, “a structure invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use”, providing one with “not action, or problem-solving, or change”, only amusement (Postman 76).

The clever doubling of screens, acts and characters not only brings to the fore these ways in which space and time are read by those who consume them as cultural products but also the way otherness and difference are produced and distributed in an entertainment economy. Major Daly has a book that he reads every day and one that he hopes to finish before he reaches India. He is hungry for information about India but usually falls asleep before actually making progress in the direction. However, he is armed with trivia of what India ought to be like. He talks about the colonial Other in stereotypes that have their sources in constructed social hierarchies and power dynamics, which codify certain groups of people with certain characteristics.

DALY: You say the cook's a Madrasi, Andrews?

ANDREWS: I believe so, sir.

DALY: Oh. I find the Madrasis a bit idle myself. Won't have them on the plantation. Still, I must admit your fellow does know how to curry a chicken. (8:43-8:54)

This exchange is starkly representative of the production of colonial knowledge about the Other; for example, British characterizations of the colonized in India where “Indians were

depicted not as individuals but as “specimens” or representatives of groups” (Metcalf 74). Such ‘information’ grew to become part of strategies of mastering and ruling, of control, which worked through the continuous dissemination of this information. Officer John Andrews offers much information about India to Clara, who is curious about the land she is going to reach soon, while they walk on the deck of the ship facing the Ocean but never really reaching India. As it is revealed, they can never reach India inside the miniscope. They are stuck in a time loop where discourse is endlessly created about the ship and its experience of the Indian Ocean in a perpetual mimicry of past discourse by people who are themselves part of a TV show production, who can never step away from the established sequence of events of the storyline. All they can do is hypothesize ‘India’ on the basis of this past discourse which they reproduce but never produce sources of on-screen. The nameless, mostly dialogue-less Indian staff on the ship never participate in this dialogue even though they are the ones navigating the waters. They appear in groups, similarly costumed and talk in a volley of voices that are intercepted by the roars of the plesiosaurus. To the 1973 audience of *Doctor Who*, their words, not even translated in subtitles, appear in obvious comparison to the untranslated ‘grunts’ of the Functionaries, who are hyper-controlled, oppressed labourers working a conveyor belt at a factory managed by the Officials; the Functionaries and the Officials constituting the two, racially-distinct classes of the Inter-minorians.

Daly’s remark about the Madrasis is put into perspective critically with the more obviously oppressive stance of the Officials to their racial Others, the Functionaries,

ORUM [*Speaking of the Minorian class known as Functionaries*]: They’ve no sense of responsibility. Give them a hygiene chamber and they store fossil fuel in it. (13:16-13:20)

The knowledge production of the IOW by Daly is exactly this sort of hyper-racialized stereotyping which facilitates recruitment and employment patterns to place and organize the Other in, and Metcalf points out “colonial recruiters shared with each other and with most officials in India a set of racial and ethnic stereotypes that shaped patterns of recruitment” (161).

These shifting frames serve as analytical models for the cultural production of difference and, in this context, of the IO, by the culture and program industries, offering ways of critically receiving these products and images via the farcical exchanges that take place between Vorg and the Officials as Vorg tries to ‘sell’ the entertainment provided by the

miniscope. The Officials even seem to consider the miniscope as a way of calming down the Functionaries from rebelling, taking interest in how television provides entertainment.

Vorg describes the purpose of the miniscope, “Our purpose is to amuse, simply to amuse. Nothing serious, nothing political!” (17:58-18:03). As the episode arc goes on to deconstruct, amusement is not totally bereft of politics. Amusement is produced by the culture industry to displace culture from politics. But what Vorg says is very crucial for as Neil Postman says in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, “the television screen wants you to remember that its imagery is always available for your amusement and pleasure”. This is its selling point. This has huge consequences for consumption, desire and consciousness. The “Carnival of Monsters” is a mere mirror of the larger, globalized endeavour, post-World War II, to “not only control the means of production (industrial capitalism), but also and simultaneously the patterns of consumption” (Rossouw 2). This is what Stiegler refers to as hyper-industrial capitalism where “millions of people are connected every day simultaneously to the same television, radio, or play console programs” which results in a systematic massification of cultural consumption and this, in turn, has consequences for desire and consciousness (Stiegler 3). If the Functionaries are the image of loss of individuation of the nineteenth century worker who became proletarianized in service of the machine tool as discussed in Simondon’s *Psychic and Collective Individuation*, the Officials show how the consumer too undergoes loss of individuation—the loss of *savoir-vivre*—through “the formatting and artificial manufacturing of his desires” (Stiegler, “Suffocated Desire” 4). The Inter-minorians are a plot device to showcase this loss of individuation, of the interference in the process of evolution of an *I* from a *We* and instead, the production of the *One*, the singular mass-manufactured consciousness evident not only in their mass-produced, ill-fitting costumes and masks but also in the way the Officials refer to themselves using ‘One’ as a pronoun instead of ‘I’—

KALIK: One witnessed the event.

ORUM: One cannot understand why they do it.

KALIK: But then one is not a functionary. (13:04-13:10)

The world inside the miniscope, the reel world of the IOscape appears more real than Inter-minor, the world of the audience of the miniscope; the former acts on the world of the consumers and this ‘one’ mass-produced consciousness. Desires turn to drives that mimic the actions onscreen. When Vorg adjusts the settings on the scope to turn the otherwise civil John

Andrews into a violent, boxing adversary, the violence onscreen transfers to the consciousness of the Official, Kalik, who becomes dissatisfied with the absence of desire that is produced by the program industry. There is a mimetic, compulsive behaviour in the consumer inhabiting ‘free-time’ for consumption which extends to all human activities—everything must become consumable. The illusion which this is based upon, however, according to Stiegler “can only provoke frustrations, discredit and destructive instincts”. For Kalik, Inter-minor itself becomes an object of consumption and the cyberlife he sees in the miniscope, the Cybermen, Ogrons, Tellurians and the Drashigs—temporal objects of the mnemotechnological system of the television which are in themselves constituted by the time of their passing—coincide with his consciousness. This coincidence facilitates consciousness to adopt the time of these objects and thus, of consumption. The plot is at its post-modern best when Vorg describes the Drashigs and the violence onscreen—a violence taking place periodically against actual people placed in miniaturized environments—as “They’re great favourites with the children!”.

The plesiosaurus regularly bursts out of the Indian Ocean to terrorize the *SS Bernice*’s mostly Indian crew and passengers in an episodic time loop produced by Vorg to ‘amuse’. Thus, discourse about the IO is created not just by Major Daly but also by Vorg who is in-charge of the storyline of the miniscope. The IOscape is a replicant of the Indian Ocean not only because it is a simulacrum of the IOW replicating the complexities of gender, class and race that come up with the experience of the IOW but also more literally, because it is a replication of marine life of the Ocean and how it is reproduced onscreen and onset. All of the shooting of the *SS Bernice* on the ‘IO’ takes place on the *RFA Robert Dundas*, a soon-to-be decommissioned vessel traveling down the Medway River in Kent, as the *Doctor Who* DVD commentary explains. All shots of the so-called “IO” take place far away from the IO and while on one level reproduce tropes about the Indian Ocean, on the other level, they also show the replicant for what is, a manipulation that cuts out the IOscape from context and time, criticizing these tropes for remaining stuck in past discourse and ‘monologic’ narratives. The fact that the miniscope and Vorg and Shirna arrive on Inter-minor on a conveyor belt like factory products showcase how objects and techniques of memory support and knowledge like television, radio, photograms, phonograms, cinematograms, videograms, and digital technologies constitute the technological infrastructure of the societies of control, especially so as one moves into the era hyper-industrial capitalism where events from say, 1926, may be recycled for news and entertainment in 1973 and so on. Once the Doctor and Jo, inside the miniscope, find out that the IOW they are experiencing is a construction, the IO becomes an inverted panopticon,

displacing the authority of the camera and breaking the appropriation of time and consciousness by the program industry; “the audience loses any sense of the Archimedean viewpoint” (Alsayyad). The IO as an inverted panopticon begins to contribute to discourse about itself—what the IO is not and how the IOScape is a complex intersection of the reel and the real—but also about the consumers outside the scope and the audience of *Doctor Who*, collapsing illusions of the distinction between the real and the virtual. The Doctor and Jo are able to infiltrate the machinery behind the miniscope that keeps up the singular IOScape and expose it for catering to consumption of information and production of an information society which has little to no concern for knowledge or *savoir-vivre*. The Doctor and Jo are able to break out of the repetitive internalization of this information society to realize how consumptive patterns are suffocating life and aiding drastic human influence on not just people but also on climate and the environment and the numerous other species that are a part of the ecosystem. The marine/oceanic (cyber)life and their controlled state in a miniaturized slice of environment has terrible consequences, the Drashigs are violent and their habitat is uninhabitable and life-threatening, the IO is polluted and populated by anomalies, and how all these complexities are produced by the program industry and its unconcern for events of the Anthropocene.

While there is no overt solution in the episode arc, with the *SS Bernice* being restored along with the other organisms of the miniscope to their ‘right’ time and place, the subversion of the information society, the return of context and of ‘time’ outside the program industry but in the IOW, and the detailing of the various networks of consumption and control, offer motivation for developing formulations of the neganthropocene. The episode of the *SS Bernice* mystery, a variation of the *Mary Celeste* mystery, sparks off intersections with the other ocean-centric Doctor Who episodes, and other reimaginings in popular culture, and a multilogic understanding of the IOScape helps engage in the kind of discussion that facilitates a contribution economy, looking at knowledge and cultural production critically.

The culture and program industries with their highly precise and well-developed marketing strategies thwart the life drive even as they strive to excite desire for consumption. A return of culture to the heart of politics and life itself could, potentially, deny the self-destructive industrial process its exploitation of the psyche and on the collective front, restore the *philia* through a reappearance of the libidinal economy. Stiegler proclaims, “Only such a resolute adoption or assumption of the organological condition will allow us, in a literal sense, to save time, that is, differentiation, insofar as, precisely, a transvaluation of the industrial economy can commit us to and engage us with the Neganthropocene, and disengage us from

the Anthropocene” (12). There is a need for a contribution economy which is critical of the effects of the Anthropocene rather than driven according to it, a society based on the economy of producing, sharing and receiving not just information but also knowledge, experiences, skills and insights—*savoir-vivre*—is the need of the hour as it produces a collective intelligence. The IOscape in a contribution economy would follow this model to interact with and produce knowledge about the Indian Ocean and the Indian Ocean World, critically.

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