

# Who's Teaching Now?: Investigating the Critical Public Pedagogy of the Sci-Fi Series Doctor Who

Robin Redmon Wright

Pennsylvania State University - Harrisburg, [rrw12@psu.edu](mailto:rrw12@psu.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

Wright, Robin Redmon (2013). "Who's Teaching Now?: Investigating the Critical Public Pedagogy of the Sci-Fi Series Doctor Who," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2013/papers/49>

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## Who's Teaching Now?: Investigating the Critical Public Pedagogy of the Sci-Fi Series *Doctor Who*

Robin Redmon Wright, The Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, USA

*Democratic ideas cannot exist without the public spheres that make them possible.  
Culture in the form of the Internet and mass media is the most powerful influence now  
used by the hyper-dead to promote their zombie politics.*

~Henry Giroux, 2010, p. 159

### Background, Purpose and Theoretical Framework

Many critical researchers in cultural studies have focused on how “cultural texts or artifacts are used in everyday life” (Mackay, 1997, p. 3). As Giroux points out in the epigraph above, mass media is an instrument used by a powerful few to whom he refers to metaphorically as zombies: “the immoral, sub-Nietzschean, id-driven ‘other’ who is ‘hyper-dead’ but still alive as an avatar of death and cruelty” (Giroux, 2011, p. 2). These zombies of capital and politics are wanton “casino capitalists” who view competition as a form of social combat, celebrate war as an extension of politics, and legitimate a ruthless Social Darwinism in which particular individuals and groups are considered simply redundant, disposable—nothing more than human waste left to stew in their own misfortune—easy prey for the zombies who have a ravenous appetite for chaos and revel in apocalyptic visions filled with destruction, decay, abandoned houses, burned-out cars, gutted landscapes, and trashed gas stations. (p. 2)

Dictating virtually all the content of mainstream media, these hyper-dead “represent the new face of the culture of cruelty and hatred in the second Gilded Age” (p. 2). Giroux further asserts that the media steeps us in thoughtless self-gratification which, by way of this constant exposure, becomes the sanctioned norm. These promoters of selfishness and cruelty include popular venues such as television, movies, magazines, blogs, and various social media. We are saturated in the messages produced by such popular culture creations.

Critical educators recognize the educational power of popular culture in constructing our lives and our worldviews. Furthermore, as critical educators, we must investigate popular culture for its influence on, and its implications for, social justice movements. Almost all of the media in the US is owned, and its content controlled, by 5 multi-national conglomerates with decidedly neoliberal agendas and with profound involvement in a myriad industries including weapons, pharmaceuticals, communications, and food production (Kunz, 2007; Miller, 2007). Moreover, Lester (1997) suggests that popular culture is “an entry point into social education... [and we] learn early and well from mass media” (p. 20). And Van Zoonen (2004) contends that political positions are formed and political decisions are made based, in part, on what is seen in popular media. Critical adult educators, then, must consider what and how adults are learning from the public pedagogy of popular culture.

Additionally, it is important that pockets of resistance to the neoliberal, capitalist ideology that manage to exist within popular culture be identified and analyzed, and their impact on fan groups explored. McLaren and Hammer (1996) argue that TV is the primary “way in which capitalism is able to secure cultural and ideological totalization and homogenization” (p. 106). I concur that most of the representations—including the fictional and the semi-fictional, such as pseudo-news cable channels like *Fox News*—are created and produced by the imperial hubris of corporate oligarchies. Most television programming reinforces dominant, oppressive, inequitable power structures, promotes U.S. consumption and global imperialism, and simultaneously structures and solidifies the illusion that they are promoting democracy (Jarvis, 2008; Usher,

2008). The aforementioned conglomerates control *all* of the major broadcast television networks, 84.9% of domestic box office revenue, 93.94% of the prime time television programming, and 76.1% of the 60+ million cable and satellite services in the US (Kunz, 2007, p. 220). As a critical educator who recognizes that adults learn much through their interactions with popular media, I search diligently for those spaces of resistance embedded in popular culture—especially cult TV, with its intensely dedicated and fiercely loyal fan base—that provide representations of a critical analysis of the hegemonic narratives currently produced by the Western media-military-industrial complex.

There are a few rare television programs that manage to spin tales of warning and opposition to the routine narratives of corporate capitalist hegemony. *Doctor Who* is one such site of resistance. *Doctor Who* is the world's longest running science fiction television series and it displays “significant representations of the postcolonial sociopathic abscess – the diverse but specific material uncertainties and horrors of contemporary existence that are attributable in some way to colonialism and its fallout” (Orthia, 2012, p. 208-209). Spawned in the U.K. in 1963 and preparing for its 50<sup>th</sup>-year celebration this spring, *Doctor Who* started life against the backdrop of Cold War political ideology and quickly grew to voice various degrees of political allegory projected through critical lenses—depending on the writers—as its theme and it has maintained this thematic undertone throughout its long history. (The Doctor, for the uninitiated, is a 900+ year-old Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey and is able to regenerate into another body 12 times. He travels through time and space via a 1950s-style British police telephone box called a Time And Relative Dimension In Space [TARDIS], which is bigger on the inside.) With each incarnation, The Doctor retains all his accumulated memories, while occupying a new white, male humanoid body with decidedly different personality traits, likes, dislikes, and propensities. Presently, The Doctor is in his 11<sup>th</sup> incarnation.

During its five decades, *Doctor Who* has evolved into the epitome of “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 20). Transmedia storytelling is “a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence,” where fans become “hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels” (p. 21). This participatory action viewing and increases fan involvement, discovery and, of course, informal learning. In this paper, I will briefly describe three *Doctor Who* episodes and their critical allegories. I will also discuss my recent research on *Doctor Who* fan groups, fan publications, and fan pedagogy as enacted in the social media site, *Meet-up Groups*. Meet-up Groups are fan-clubs that use both online and face-to-face meeting spaces to—in the case of Meet-up Groups that focus on a cultural artifact like television or movies—view, discuss and celebrate various popular cultural storylines, characters, artifacts and activities. These are informal learning groups; and the learning that ensues—both through television viewing and through the pursuits of the fan-groups—can serve to impact and shape adult identity development. I will briefly discuss these phenomena.

### **Research Design**

For this project I watched and analyzed over 80 videos that were representative of the 50 years of *Doctor Who* episodes, attended numerous meetings of *Doctor Who* fan-groups, collected nearly 200 fanzines (fan created magazines and newsletters), 300 official *Doctor Who* magazines and 200 Sci-fi and fantasy magazines that prominently featured Doctor Who stories (for comparison). I also studied the content of various fan web pages and web groups such as the Meet-Up Groups and Facebook. I also acquired and watched several fan-films (*Doctor Who* episodes made by fan groups and videotaped for other fans). The analyses of these artifacts and my field experiences were achieved with a combination of critical discourse analysis (Machin and Mayr, 2012), visual media analysis, textual analysis, media content analysis, and emic observation analysis (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011).

### **Research Findings**

It is impossible to share the full results in this brief space, but some significant findings include:

1. Numerous counter-hegemonic, anti-colonial, and pro-democratic messages and themes within the scripts of the episodes spanning all five decades.
2. Highly democratic messages developed and retold in fan fiction, fan analysis, and fan discussions.
3. Tangential groups with social action agendas formed and actuated as natural byproducts of active fan spaces.

Many episodes from the five decades of the television show reveal implicit and explicit counter-hegemonic messages. For example, in a 1972 episode called, *The Mutants*, Bob Baker and Dave Martin write a clear allegory of anti-colonialism, apartheid and the issues of post-colonial remuneration. In this episode, The Doctor visits a planet that humans colonized more than 500 years earlier at a time when control of the planet and its resources is to revert to the planet's original inhabitants. These inhabitants, under the rule of human capitalists, have been working in the planet's mines for those 5 centuries and, apparently as a result, have now begun to mutate. Unfortunately for them, the planet is now virtually uninhabitable as a result of human exploitation. Colonization and/or postcolonial politics, and their devastating effects, are the focus of numerous *Doctor Who* episodes, including: *The Sensorites* (1964), *The Savages*, (1966), *The Power of Kroll* (1978), *The Happiness Patrol* (1988), and *Planet of the Ood* (2008), to name a few.

In the 2005 *Doctor Who* episode, "The Long Game," written by Russell T. Davis, the effective propagation of human beliefs, politics, consumption practices, and worldviews by mass media—with purely corporate and banking interests—is explored. In this episode, the character of "the Editor" (played by Simon Pegg) is the front man for a consortium of banks and a gross disgusting alien—clearly written as an indictment of Rupert Murdoch, the media mogul and owner of *Fox News*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Sun*, *The New York Post*, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox* and *MySpace*, among numerous other media holdings. The Editor, with his financial industry backers, controls all news media shown to the "Great and Bountiful Human Empire" of the future. Every human in the universe gets his or her news from "Satellite 5". The Editor explains media's power to shape the politics of a human empire this way:

Create a climate of fear and it's easy to keep the borders closed. It's just a matter of emphasis. The right word in the right broadcast, repeated often enough, can destabilize an economy, invent an enemy, change a vote.

And, of course, maintain the dominant power structures with the attendant inequalities inherent in free-market capitalist hegemony and Western global financial domination (hence, the banks and the monster).

In another Davis-penned episode, "The End of the World," the protagonist is the Lady Cassandra, a Texas widow who has had so much plastic surgery that she is basically a piece of skin stretched trampoline-style across a frame. She requires constant "moisturizing" by her servants and constant care as her organs are located in a jar beneath the frame supporting and stretching her skin. Cassandra has no regard for life other than her own in her insatiable obsessive quest for her version of perfection and possessions (as the media tells us—you can't be too thin or too rich). According to DiPaolo (2010), this episode criticizes "humans in general and Americans in particular" for being "more interested in the trappings of consumer culture—trendy fashion, fabricated music, plastic surgery, fast food—than they are in preventing global warming and other ecological disasters from destroying the Earth" (p. 974). My analysis concurs and I would add that this episode also critically examines the incredible and widening disparity between the extremely wealthy and the growing number of the very poor across the globe.

### **Fanzines, Fan Fiction, Fan Films, Fan Sites, and Fan Groups**

Many of the fan-generated *Doctor Who* messages mirror such critical cultural analyzes (although with less finesse). Among the approximately 200 fanzines (fan produced magazines and newsletters) that I examined were those with the titles: *Skaro*, *Shada*, *Eye of Horus*, *Mini-Skirts Etcetera*, *Network*, *The Key*, *Auton*, *Beyond the Sun*, *The Celestial Toyroom*, *Enlightment*, *Whovian Times*, *Krang*, *The Frame*, *Gumblejack*, *The Second Dimension*, *Private Who*, and the *DW Bulletin* (which later evolved into DreamWatch Magazine). Most were produced in the U.K., although a few were produced in the U.S. or Canada. The fanzines range from typed newsletters held together with a stapled corner, to newspaper print, to full-color magazines. Much of the content consists of reviews of *Doctor Who* books and episodes, but fan fiction, descriptions of fan events, and analyses of plots and themes appear regularly as well. As Thomas (2011) determined, fan fiction “highlights the motivations and desires of readers—in ways theorists of narrative need to take into account” (p. 6). He goes on to argue that fan fiction offers fans “transformative powers” and can be used as a “transgressive force, offering a voice for marginalized groups and revealing the subversive potential of seemingly safe or familiar storyworlds” (p. 7).

Figure 1

**Magazines & Newsletters**  
\*approximate findings

<b>Commercial (BBC)</b>	<b>Fanzines (Fan Produced)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>50% Consumer Ads</b></li> <li><b>Pedagogy</b></li> <li>• <b>Framing the Doctor (35%)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Adventurer 55%</li> <li>– Humanitarian 15%</li> <li>– Hero 17%</li> <li>– Activist 6%</li> <li>– Other 2%</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Technical knowledge (11%)</b></li> <li>• <b>Community Activities (3%)</b></li> <li>• <b>Other (1%)</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>&gt;5% Ads</b></li> <li><b>Pedagogy</b></li> <li>• <b>Framing the Doctor (65%)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Adventurer 25%</li> <li>– Humanitarian 28%</li> <li>– Hero 20%</li> <li>– Activist 32%</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Technical knowledge (12%)</b></li> <li>• <b>Community Activities (15%)</b></li> <li>• <b>Other (3%)</b></li> </ul>

Although I am again in process of adjusting my categories and criteria as deeper, ongoing analysis requires, initial analyses yielded significant differences in themes between commercially produced and fan produced ephemera. In particular, there are significant differences in how *The Doctor* is framed as a character. Figure 1 illustrates some key findings in the public pedagogy of *Doctor Who* fanzines and magazines. In fanzines, The Doctor is positioned much more often as an activist, humanitarian, or hero working to aid/free the oppressed while being critical of the oppressors.

While fan films are often campy and filled with hyperbole, they also tend to frame the doctor as an anti-colonialist and post-colonial activist. And fan websites often have discussions on current issues framed as questions of “what would The Doctor do/think/insist upon.” These discussions often revolve around questions of same-sex marriage, homophobia, sexist attitudes (by some people commenting on the site), racism, and economic inequities. The general consensus is clear: The Doctor would fight for equality on all fronts.

Around the country there are *Doctor Who* Meet-Up Groups socializing both online and face-to-face. The face-to-face gatherings produce discussions of key issues facing adults today and sometimes generate sub-groups who take on charitable projects or participate in social action activities. These groups are quite diverse with respect to race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and education level. There is a lot of learning going on in these groups and, while not all of it is critical, a significant portion of it is. In addition to discussions of the critical themes in various episodes, novels and short stories, the fans (like those in the group that I participated with) teach practical skills to one another while working together on group projects such as building a TARDIS, making Whovian toys, or baking Whovian treats. Those fans shared with each other what they knew about creative skills like painting, music, photography, and costume design. Most importantly, these groups are communities that voluntarily gather in informal settings to learn from one another with the television series as their connecting link. The discussions that occur during these activities, as well the communal viewings of Dr. Who episodes arranged across the country, often turn to the themes of democracy, equality, anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism prevalent in the show's narratives.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

Traditionally, researchers and practitioners in the field of adult education have overlooked or discounted the astonishing amount of learning taking place through individual engagement with popular culture and with the associated fan groups. Giroux (2011, p. 158) calls on educators to challenge the zombie politics that gives rise to suffering for the many in order to provide for the mindless consumption by the few. He suggests challenging the corporate and political elite by: 1) seeking to address the massive cultural and structural inequalities produced by unregulated casino capitalism, and 2) recognizing the educational power of popular culture in the fight to reclaim the public spheres of mass media.

These calls for more focus on popular culture are not new. French philosophers like Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard all exhort us to be critically aware of social-political constructs of words and images. They believed that culturally and politically constructed artifacts, like film and television, mold and control the human imagination. This space—outside classrooms and within the public sphere of popular culture—is powerful. McLaren and Hammer (1996) call television programming the “perpetual pedagogy” allowing the corporate, capitalist structure to literally colonize our minds and assure reproduction of the status quo of savage inequalities and an accepting populace. Yet, the public pedagogy of social learning spaces called *fandom* can be significant—and fan-groups may indeed be spaces where critical educators find the seeds of social action already developing. It is in these shared social spaces that public pedagogy takes hold of imaginations leading to life-long learning, identity development, and a learned, constant practice of ideology critique.

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