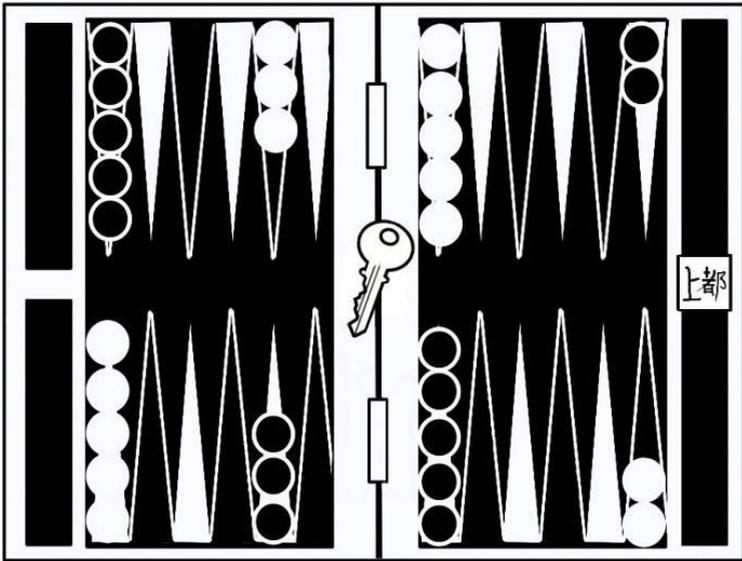


**The Black Archive #18**

**MARCO POLO**

**Sampler**



**By Dene October**

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## **‘Take the keys, Doctor’: Fans, Movement and Transformation**

In Lucarotti’s novel, Marco distinguishes between his adventures generally and those with the Doctor since, while the former are sometimes hard to believe, the latter are impossible. It is just as well then that Marco dismisses the Doctor’s advice to ‘watch out for those Genoese’ who later capture him and in whose prison he encounters Rustichello and is encouraged to tell his tales. And since – in the original script, at least – the Doctor has stolen many of Marco’s records, the Venetian will have to find some dramatic narrative means to cover the holes in his story. Similarly, our own experiences of the serial are woven through domestic memories, while the holes we encounter represent gaps as well as opportunities.

In their interactions with the missing archive, fans have much in common with Marco, who weaves first-hand experiences together with secondary sources, and collaborates with the skilful writer Rustichello, whose modifications contribute to *The Travels*’ abiding popularity. Like the Doctor, fans are temporal nomads, revisiting the past but torn between being faithful to history and recognising how their very presence changes it. When fans use media to reconstruct the past, they may even catch sight of themselves in the medial frame before their immersion in the story effaces their involvement – like the aftersong of the TARDIS dematerialising the link it has made between one space and another.

Since its dereliction at the hands of the BBC, the ‘missing’ archive has become the contested property of official producers and fans, the

latter's 'textual production'<sup>1</sup> reworking the missing text through fan-talk, fan-art and reconstructions. Fans, in particular television fans, are frequently devalued as consumer dupes, as cultural fears over television's negative influence persist beyond the 1964 public reception of *Marco Polo*. Yet fans are well placed to appropriate media-skills and technologies in reworking their fandom. As fan theorist Henry Jenkins points out, while passive audiences lack control over the fan object, leaving it to producers to protect its integrity<sup>2</sup>, active fans exert control<sup>3</sup>. Fans test how we value certain knowledge economies over others and highlight elitist research-practices, making a compelling case for comparing them with academic historian-archivists.

Dedicated fans, like academics, use knowledge and research skills to create, participate, collaborate and share, reconstructing the archive and remediating the serial just as copyists adapted *The Travels* into the serial. As a process, remediation highlights the dialectic between transparency, the immersive viewing experience, and hyper-consciousness, where the new medium is highly visible. Although the tapes of the original serial have been wiped, fans reconstruct the lost serial through modern media, such as YouTube, and by marrying together surviving resources. Such reconstructions can prove difficult for casual fans to watch, particularly those who are hoping for an authentic and immersive viewing experience. Yet it is this very lack of immediacy which keeps it within the purview of other fans,

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<sup>1</sup> See Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, on how fan studies have repositioned fans as active contributors to the interpretation of texts, and Hills, Matt, *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating Doctor Who in the Twenty-first Century*, on the changing relationship between **Doctor Who** authors/producers and fans.

<sup>2</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p27.

<sup>3</sup> Davisson, Amber and Paul Booth, 'Reconceptualizing Communication and Agency in Fan Activity: A Proposal for A Projected Interactivity Model for Fan Studies', *Texas Speech Communication Journal*, Vol 32, #1, p34.

who participate in discussion of such reconstructions at conventions, and through social media, thereby distinguishing themselves from casual viewers. This hypermediacy also elevates *Marco Polo* from its originally intended purpose of educating and entertaining its BBC audience over fifty years ago and takes the production and reconstruction of the broadcast to a different level of appreciation if not appropriation.

Attempts to recreate an immersive televisual experience operate through a contradictory logic, operating through a modern optic and drawing attention to media not available at the time of original transmission<sup>4</sup>. The use of colour photographs by Loose Cannon in 2002 became a source of distraction for some while others were struck by how the shots situate viewers in television history: 'the quality of these Sets [sic] are that good, that Colour is the best way to see them,' says one reviewer on *The Doctor Who Ratings Guide*, an online site dedicated to fan reviews. A second Loose Cannon production in 2013 made use of the newly discovered tele-snaps enabling the desire for nostalgic televisuality, but since John Cura only used half the frame of 35mm film to save on costs, they are inevitably of low clarity. Mark Eden provides supplementary narration for episodes one and seven, allowing Marco, in his final year of life (1324), to reflect on his strangest adventure. The reconstruction borrows the language of frame mobility and focalisation to hint at authentic televisuality, using careful editing, including synching to sound, with zooms into and across the frame. Stephen Cox, who animated the Who Recons CGI version, felt that there would have to be a trade-off 'between a historical recreation

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<sup>4</sup> The 2015 audio recon by Whoflix attempts to 'pick up the pace' by eliminating long silences where actors respond to each other visually, and focuses on Marco's narration, thereby reducing the seven episodes to just over one hour. A condensed 30-minute video reconstruction on 'The Beginning' dvd box set is an attempt to recreate a televisual experience albeit by eliminating slow, discursive elements, 'improving' it for modern audiences used to faster story-telling.

that is 100% accurate and creating something that is as watchable and engaging as possible'<sup>5</sup> and thus prioritised depth of scale (space) and movement, over fidelity to the camera scripts, including selecting from a new palette of 'camera angles'.

Reconstructions also demonstrate how fan-practices (and fans) are informed by wider media practices including those of the new series of **Doctor Who**. Josh Snares uses several striking mobility effects 'purely to bring life to the still images'<sup>6</sup> so the first episode adds a blizzard effect to the surviving moving image sequence from 'The Brink of Disaster' (1964) before segueing to an animated TARDIS through which flat stills of the regulars slide out. This montage of reused material and screengrabs is cut out in Photoshop and pasted in Adobe Premiere, the sense of movement augmented by a range of pans, zooms and reverse shots: inside Marco's yurt, Ping-Cho's soup literally steams.<sup>7</sup> The effects enable the film-maker to tell the story as clearly as possible: 'When you're missing visuals and movement, you're losing half the story. I believe the story is the most important part that's missing. A lot of people who have seen my animations say that they finally understand the story'.

Even so, Snares admits the added motion meant the journey left him giddy. 'I got a bit carried away. Almost like sea sickness!'

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<sup>5</sup> Private correspondence. For Cox, the status of *Marco Polo* as missing meant there was less observance to matching visual treatments while, '[f]or stories with some existing episodes like *The Crusade* (1965), I would endeavour to match the originals'.

<sup>6</sup> Private correspondence.

<sup>7</sup> Marco Polo frequently dallies over descriptions of food in *The Travels*, and the reference to the Doctor's enjoyment of Ping-Cho's soup in episode one is surely Lucarotti's acknowledgement of this.