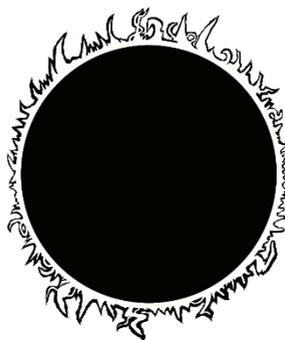


**The Black Archive #17**  
**THE IMPOSSIBLE PLANET**  
**/**  
**THE SATAN PIT**  
**Sampler**



**By Simon Bucher-Jones**

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To my family, and to my fellow Black Archivists – James Cooray Smith, Andrew Hickey and Jonathan Dennis – for encouragement and kind words, and to my editor Philip Purser-Hallard for letting me miss a couple of deadlines while I was editing an anthology simultaneously.

‘Never thought I’d get to meet the Devil,  
Never thought I’d meet him face to face.  
Heard he always worked alone,  
That he seldom wrote or used the phone,  
So I walked right up to meet him at his place.’

[Paul Williams, *The Phantom of the Paradise*]

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## CHAPTER 1: 'PLANET ZOG'

### The Rejection of the Theatrical, Or Why Is It so Impossible to Do Alien Planets in 21st-Century Doctor Who?

'Rose and the Doctor get trapped on a desolate sphere orbiting a black hole, accompanied by a creature called the Ood. How will they face up to an ancient terror stirring beneath the surface?'

[*Radio Times*]<sup>1</sup>

Even the *Radio Times* calls it a 'desolate sphere', as if it's forgotten what a 'planet' is. By the time of *The Impossible Planet / The Satan Pit* (2006), there was some fannish feeling that 21st-century **Doctor Who** was limited to space stations, adventures on Earth, or (stretching mightily, once) New Earth – an alien world in the far, far future selected by nostalgic humans because it was like Earth in every salient respect<sup>2</sup>.

'A common criticism levelled at the first season of the new **Doctor Who** series had concerned its lack of alien environments, with all 13 episodes taking place either on Earth or aboard a space station in Earth orbit.'

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<sup>1</sup> *Radio Times*, 3 to 9 June 2006. Accessed via the BBC Genome Project.

<sup>2</sup> *New Earth* (2006).

[Shannon Patrick Sullivan]<sup>3</sup>

This was a criticism still made of **Doctor Who** as recently as 2014:

‘I think **Doctor Who** has the greatest concept for a television program[me] ever created. One that has immense scope, the whole of time and space. However I feel the show often doesn’t utili[s]e the sandbox the concept promotes. The entire universe and most of the episodes are set on Earth, and when they do leave Earth they go somewhere that’s populated by mostly humans or only humans.’

[‘PaperSkin’, Digital Spy forums]<sup>4</sup>

But how much of this is intent, and how much of this is nostalgia, and how much of this is a genuine change in the show’s choices of ‘backdrop’ over time? Was it true when Matt Jones and Russell T Davies gave *The Impossible Planet* a title with the P-word in, and is it true now?

At first glance there is a case to answer. In its first season, the renewed **Doctor Who** featured adventures taking place in, respectively: contemporary London; a space station orbiting the original Earth just before our sun goes nova in the far future; Victorian Cardiff; London one year after Rose met the Doctor; a secret base under the desert outside Salt Lake City in the near-future year of 2012; the space station Satellite 5 in the year 200,000; London on the day in 1987 when Rose’s father died;

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<sup>3</sup> Shannon Sullivan, ‘*The Impossible Planet / The Satan Pit*’.

<sup>4</sup> ‘PaperSkin’, ‘All of Time and Earth, (Maybe Show Us Some Planets)’.

London during World War Two; contemporary Cardiff<sup>5</sup>; and Satellite 5 again<sup>6</sup>.

The second season had added New Earth – a planet that though technically alien is explicitly the ‘same size as Earth’ with the ‘same air, same orbit’<sup>7</sup>; Victorian Scotland; a contemporary comprehensive school; a 51st-century spaceship time-linked to 18th-century France; a contemporary but alternate Earth; and London in the 1950s<sup>8</sup>.

For any series other than **Doctor Who**, this would be a wide variety of settings, comprising as it does in its first year, present and near-future political intrigue and invasion, historical drama outside and within the lifetime of the Doctor’s companion, and far-future space epic. However, if we compare it with the season of **Doctor Who** which began the series in 1963, an absence becomes immediately visible.

In the 1963-64 season, the Doctor and his companions faced danger: on prehistoric Earth; on the alien planet Skaro; inside the TARDIS itself; in central Asia in 1289; on the alien planet Marinus;

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Contemporary’ stories during this period need to be dated a little ahead to allow for the year when Rose is missing between *Rose* and *Aliens of London* (both 2005, but the latter set in 2006).

<sup>6</sup> In, respectively, *Rose*, *The End of the World*, *The Unquiet Dead*, *Aliens of London* / *World War Three*, *Dalek*, *The Long Game*, *Father’s Day*, *The Empty Child* / *The Doctor Dances*, *Boom Town* and *Bad Wolf* / *The Parting of the Ways* (all 2005).

<sup>7</sup> According to the Doctor in *New Earth*.

<sup>8</sup> In, respectively, *New Earth*, *Tooth and Claw*, *School Reunion*, *The Girl in the Fireplace*, *Rise of the Cybermen* / *The Age of Steel*, and *The Idiot’s Lantern* (all 2006).

in Mexico in the 15th century; on an Earth spaceship and the alien planet Sense-sphere; and in 18th-century France<sup>9</sup>.

The obvious difference is the presence in 1963-64 of three stories set on alien worlds, but in fact it goes deeper than that. The earlier season is capable of tackling stories set across a far wider range of human history, and in a wider range of countries, whereas in the later season even a trip to America is conducted entirely within the walls of a hidden sub-desert facility.

Why is this? The techniques of television have substantially improved in terms of available special effects, and the budgets of **Doctor Who**, even allowing for inflation, were substantially higher in 2005 than in 1963. The average cost in 1963 was £2,000 per episode, as against £1 million per episode in 2005<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, something else was changing faster than the value of money or the amount of it available: the expectations of the audience.

The original methodology of **Doctor Who** was essentially that of a filmed stage production using a single camera film model<sup>11</sup>, and the audience responded to the depiction of reality that this model could give with a response appropriate to the mimesis of a stage

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<sup>9</sup> In *An Unearthly Child* (1963), *The Daleks* (1963-64), *The Edge of Destruction*, *Marco Polo*, *The Keys of Marinus*, *The Aztecs*, *The Sensorites* and *The Reign of Terror* (all 1964) respectively. As we will see later there are connections between *The Sensorites* in particular and *The Impossible Planet/ The Satan Pit*.

<sup>10</sup> According to 'UK Inflation Calculator', the equivalent of £1 million now would have paid for 34 episodes of *Doctor Who* in 1963.

<sup>11</sup> Hewett, Richard, *The Changing Spaces of Studio Acting* (2017), p14.

production<sup>12</sup>. It needed only a backdrop in the studio and some withered trees to produce a 'Dead Planet', and for many years afterwards the audience would accept quarries and simple landscaping as being perfectly adequate and even (with a good tailwind) excellent depictions of other worlds.

While this perception held there was no problem of suspension of disbelief in depicting alien worlds, and decisions about the 'backdrop' for stories were driven primarily by financial rather than aesthetic or dramatic considerations. So, alien worlds and historical stories both decline during Seasons 5 and 6 (1967-69), while contemporary and future stories increase. Season 7 is of course the endpoint of this: the Doctor has been exiled to Earth and that year there are no trips to any worlds more alien than a parallel, dystopian Britain.

The 10th anniversary season, though, sees the raising of the Doctor's sentence of exile, and from then on throughout the whole of the remaining decade, adventures on alien worlds return to their past share (or higher) of the **Doctor Who** formula.

Towards the end of the 1970s, however, something changed, and while it took until the early 1980s for the change to really impact, it would make a substantial difference to the perception of **Doctor Who** and what it could accomplish. The change began with *Star Wars* (1977), which reset the bar for audience expectations, both for film and television.

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<sup>12</sup> 'In the '60s, the theatre was the thing and actors generally were quite disparaging about "television actors".' Peter Purves, 'Foreword' to Shearman, Robert, and Toby Hadoke, *Running Through Corridors Volume 1* (2010), p6.

At first, renewed interest in science fiction drove the development of new television projects, with **Blake's 7** (1978-81) counterpointing **Doctor Who** on the BBC and with its main writers (Terry Nation, Chris Boucher and Robert Holmes), its composer (Dudley Simpson) and many of its directors (Michael E Briant, Pennant Roberts, Douglas Camfield and George Spenton-Foster) drawn from the same pool of talent. At this point, the depiction of alien worlds was still possible using the alternative approach of either quarries or set dressing, but a perceived gap between what television could do and what could be presented by the budgets of Hollywood was now obvious and would continue to grow.

At the same time, in general, the audience's model for how it perceived television was moving from a theatrical to a filmic mode, until **Doctor Who** was practically the last drama-adventure series on UK television being filmed in the old way. **Survivors** (1975-77)<sup>13</sup> and **Blake's 7** fell away.

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<sup>13</sup> Cited as using the same camera techniques and studio approach as **Doctor Who** (Hewitt, p14).

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Simon Bucher-Jones is the author of *The Black Archive # 5: Image of the Fendahl*, as well as six novels (with and without co-writers), short stories, poems, and a cursed play.

He has been, in order, a theist, a Christian and an atheist, and is therefore well placed to discuss the snares of the Devil, having clumsily stumbled through a good many of them to date. He has yet to fall into a black hole; however, he is planning to leave his civil service job and become a full-time writer, which may be said to amount to the same thing.