

# 1. *Doctor Who*: Heroes Through Time

*Doctor Who* (1963–1989, 2005–) is a curiosity in the vast landscape of British television history. What started out as an educational children’s programme has transformed into a “pop-cultural artefact”<sup>1</sup> and a “cultural phenomenon”.<sup>2</sup> The Doctor, the eponymous hero of the BBC’s time travel programme, is a figure invested both with personal memories, emotions and values, and with those of a whole nation. Since the programme first aired in 1963, thirteen actors (twelve male, one female) have portrayed the Doctor;<sup>3</sup> made possible by the science-fiction element of ‘regeneration’ that allows the Doctor to receive a new body and personality. After a dozen men acting the part, the most recent incarnation of the Doctor crossed the gender boundary when Jodie Whittaker appeared in the title role (2018), and her second series (2020) introduced the idea that the Doctor’s *original* incarnation, predating the television series, was female.<sup>4</sup> This narrative twist is yet another sign of the Doctor and *Doctor Who* overall evolving and changing through the decades. The programme has survived the replacement of its early stars, a magnitude of producers and writers, and even sixteen years off-air (1989–2005), perhaps due to its ability to offer an incomparable “window into the British imagination”.<sup>5</sup> *Doctor Who* has evolved into not only one of the “most popular and lucrative international exports” of British television<sup>6</sup> but has also granted its protagonist a “place [...] in the national imagination [that] can

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<sup>1</sup> Brian J. Robb: *Timeless Adventures. How Doctor Who Conquered TV*, Harpenden 2009, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Gillian I. Leitch: Introduction, in: Gillian I. Leitch (ed.): *Doctor Who in Time and Space. Essays on Themes, Characters, History and Fandom, 1963–2012*, Jefferson 2013, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Since the Doctor is neither an exclusively male nor an exclusively female character, I will use gender-neutral pronouns (“they”, “their”, “them” and “themselves”) whenever I refer to the Doctor as an overall character, i.e. in a way that implies the inclusion of all incarnations. For individual Doctors (the First Doctor, Second Doctor etc.), I will use pronouns in accordance with the gender of the actor portraying that Doctor, i.e. “he”, “his”, “him” and “himself” for all Doctors from First to Twelfth and “she”, “her” and “herself” for the Thirteenth Doctor.

<sup>4</sup> In a narrative twist that changed the Doctor’s own background and history of origin as well as that of their home planet Gallifrey, the episode “The Timeless Children” (2020) introduced the idea that the BBC’s ‘First Doctor’ (William Hartnell, 1963–1966) was not actually the first incarnation of the figure but merely started a new regeneration cycle. The episode shows the Doctor as a girl, the ‘Timeless Child’, as well as in many more (male and female) incarnations, all predating the ‘First Doctor’. For the sake of clarity, I will continue to refer to the Doctors as First, Second etc. as they have been canonized since 1963, including referring to Jodie Whittaker’s Thirteenth Doctor as the ‘first female Doctor’, which remains accurate within the production history of the programme if not within the intradiegetic fictional history of the *Doctor Who* universe.

<sup>5</sup> Dominic Sandbrook: *The Great British Dream Factory. The Strange History of Our National Imagination*, London 2015, p. 402.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

hardly be exaggerated”.<sup>7</sup> Often compared to or named in line with James Bond, Sherlock Holmes and Robin Hood,<sup>8</sup> the Doctor is one of the central heroes of British popular culture. At the same time, the British national imaginary features prominently in *Doctor Who*.

This study of the heroic in *Doctor Who* offers a look at the underlying socio-cultural make-up of Great Britain through the course of more than half a century, combining experiences of the day-to-day and grand national narratives due to the ways in which the medium of television is embedded in cultural sense-making. The heroes of *Doctor Who* are woven into the everyday – discussed over dinner, argued about in coffee breaks and on social media, and peering out from posters in childhood bedrooms. Yet the heroes are exceptional in ways that exceed the realm and reach of the viewers’ every-day. They are always in motion. They travel to the edge of time. They negotiate the values, identities and feeling-states of whole generations of the British nation.

Heroes, and the ways in which they are represented, are cornerstones of (collective) identities. What is considered heroic, as well as the textual and medial specificities of representations of the heroic, always stems from a specific cultural and temporal context. Heroic figures “crystallise the ideals and norms of a society [...] and they can contribute to the building, maintenance or destruction of communities”.<sup>9</sup> The “apparent surge in the need for heroes” after 9/11<sup>10</sup> highlights the capacity of heroic figures to respond to challenges within society. Similarly, the omnipresence of heroic figures in young adult fiction<sup>11</sup> suggests that in these formative years of our individual lives, we are especially prone to turn to heroic narratives. Heroes help us to “shape our sense of self, and color the ways that we interpret our identities”.<sup>12</sup> Especially in moments of insecurity about one’s identity, strength and belonging, heroic figures offer orientation and reassurance to both individuals and collectives.<sup>13</sup>

Heroes exemplarily negotiate the values, fears and desires of a group at any given place and time. Geoffrey Cubitt and Allan Warren’s study *Heroic Reputa-*

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>8</sup> See Robb: *Timeless Adventures*, p. 15; James Chapman: *Inside the TARDIS. The Worlds of Doctor Who. A Cultural History*, London 2006, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Korte / Stefanie Lethbridge: Introduction. *Heroes and Heroism in British Fiction. Concepts and Conjunctures*, in: ead. (eds.): *Heroes and Heroism in British Fiction since 1800. Case Studies*, London 2017, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Susan J. Ducker / Gary Grumpert: *The Global Communication Environment of Heroes*, in: id. (eds.): *Heroes in a Global World*, New York 2007, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> See Kristina Sperlich: *The Heroic in British Young Adult Fiction. Traditions and Renegotiations*, in: Barbara Korte / Stefanie Lethbridge (eds.): *Heroes and Heroism in British Fiction since 1800. Case Studies*, London 2017, p. 169.

<sup>12</sup> Lance Strate: *Heroes and/as Communication*, in: Susan J. Ducker / Gary Grumpert (eds.): *Heroes in a Global World*, New York 2007, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the connection between heroization and the formation of collective identities within specific temporal contexts, please refer to Chapter 4: *Heroic Moments and/in History*, pp. 157–159.

*tions and Exemplary Lives* (2000) particularly highlights, as the title suggests, the exemplary nature of heroes. As Cubitt writes in the introduction to the volume, heroes are figures “endowed by others, not just with a high degree of fame and honour, but with a special allocation of imputed meaning and symbolic significance”.<sup>14</sup> They become “the object of some kind of emotional investment”<sup>15</sup> and have an affective dimension beyond symbolically embodying what a society deems important. One “cannot remain indifferent” to heroes.<sup>16</sup> They resonate with the community that heroizes them.

Beyond their symbolic significance and societal relevance, it is not so easy to pinpoint what exactly constitutes a hero.<sup>17</sup> First of all, “an essentialist definition does not apply” because of the cultural specificity of heroes.<sup>18</sup> Certain character traits, while they might be perceived as prototypically ‘heroic’ within their cultural context, are always specific to that context, for example the idea that heroes “are also leaders”,<sup>19</sup> that they display “action, courage, and decisiveness”,<sup>20</sup> or that they represent “virtue, honour [and] nobility” (my translation).<sup>21</sup> ‘Heroic’ is not an inherent quality; it is ascribed and thus requires narratives of heroization – “there are no private heroes”.<sup>22</sup> These heroizations are based much more on how a figure functions within a society than on their fixed character traits. Central for the heroization of an individual are five attributes: “1) they are extraordinary, 2) they are autonomous and transgressive, 3) they are morally and affectively charged, 4) they have an agonistic character and 5) a high degree of agency.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt: Introduction, in: Geoffrey Cubitt / Allan Warren (eds.): *Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives*, Manchester 2000, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ulrich Bröckling: Negations of the Heroic. A Typological Essay, in: *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen*, Special Issue 5, 2019: Analyzing Processes of Heroization. Theories, Methods, Histories, p. 39. DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/05.

<sup>17</sup> The term ‘hero’ refers to both men and women. For a more detailed discussion of gendered heroic terminology, see Chapter 3 (pp. 89–91).

<sup>18</sup> Ralf von den Hoff et al.: Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms. Transformations and Conjunctions from Antiquity to Modernity. Foundational Concepts of the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 948, in: *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen*, Special Issue 5: Analyzing Processes of Heroization. Theories, Methods, Histories, 2019, p. 10. DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/02.

<sup>19</sup> Scott T. Allison / George R. Goethals: *Heroes. What They Do & Why We Need Them*, Oxford 2011, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Bröckling: *Negotiations*, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> Sonderforschungsbereich 948: Held, in: *Compendium Heroicum*, 2019. DOI: 10.6094/hericum/hdd1.0: “So können Zuschreibungen wie etwa ‚Überwindung von Widerstand‘, ‚Bereitschaft zur Selbstaufgabe‘, ‚Schutz / Rettung / Befreiung anderer‘, ‚Tugend / Ehre / Großmut‘ das heroische Relationengefüge (menschliche Person, übermenschliche Leistung / Tat, Charisma / Strahlkraft, Verehrung, Transgression) konkretisieren.”

<sup>22</sup> Bernhard Giesen: *Triumph and Trauma*, Boulder 2004, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Tobias Schlechtriemen: The Hero and a Thousand Actors. On the Constitution of Heroic Agency, in: *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen*, 4.1, 2016, p. 17. DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2016/01/03.

These typological attributes – rather than essentialist character traits – allow us to identify heroes in many different temporal and cultural contexts.

A closer look at a character's boundary work helps to understand – and describe – the process of heroization in itself beyond mere identification of the result, i.e. the hero. Tobias Schlechtriemen has suggested a relational approach for this, shifting the analytical perspective “away from the heroized individual and toward the processes by which heroes with their respective qualities are generated.”<sup>24</sup> Rather than simply ascribing the typological attributes to heroic figures, we can look at “how that quality develops in relation to the constellation of figures internal to the narration.”<sup>25</sup> A character might for instance cross a boundary that is “insurmountable” for others or take agency that others are denied.<sup>26</sup> This boundary work would then afford the attribution of transgressiveness or agency. These processes are always relational because “boundaries emerge between different social actors and sometimes dissolve again.”<sup>27</sup> The boundary work-approach to processes of heroization allows us to reconstruct “different processes, practices and media effects that generate the heroic figure from a relational perspective”,<sup>28</sup> making it a highly flexible instrument of analysis.

As the symbolic significance of heroes as well as the perspective of boundary work strongly suggest, heroes can only ever be defined in relation to a group and by their function therein. Their deeds “fluctuate between norm creation, norm fulfilment, and norm violation”.<sup>29</sup> Due to their exceptionality, heroic figures are never fully integrated into a group; yet, at the same time, they cannot exist entirely independently from that group. Like the ancient Greek mythical heroes, heroic figures are situated between humans and Gods. Some of them come in the shape of rebels who disrupt societies, others in the shape of founders who create them. Many of them are men, and some of them are women. The Doctor has come in different shapes, too, crossing boundaries of time and space in their TARDIS and fixing the universe with their sonic screwdriver.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Tobias Schlechtriemen: The Hero as an Effect. Boundary Work in Processes of Heroization, in: *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen*, Special Issue 5: Analyzing Processes of Heroization. Theories, Methods, Histories, 2019, p. 17. DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/03.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Bröckling: *Negotiations*, p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> TARDIS is an acronym for “Time and Relative Dimension in Space”. The TARDIS is the Doctor’s spaceship, a blue police box that is bigger on the inside. The sonic screwdriver is the Doctor’s only ‘weapon’, first introduced in 1968. It can open doors, fix things and has changing special features (e.g. scanning and classifying matter and (alien) life forms, medical scans and blood tests). *Doctor Who*-specific terminology, such as “TARDIS” and “sonic screwdriver”, is included in a short glossary which is part of the Appendix and serves as a point of reference (see p. 283).

The Doctor has frequently been framed as a central figure in the landscape of British popular-culture heroes. However, as of yet there has been no study that investigates the origin and changing nature of the Doctor's own heroic status and heroism as a concept within the programme in general. A lot of writing has, of course, touched upon the subject. Often, the Doctor and occasionally other characters in the programme are referred to in passing as heroes or heroic, without specifying what exactly that denomination entails.<sup>31</sup> The attempts to identify exactly what 'kind of hero' the Doctor is and has been in their different incarnations have been vague.<sup>32</sup> Valerie Estelle Frankel described the Doctor's adventures between 2005 to 2014 as an endless repetition of Campbell's 'hero's journey'.<sup>33</sup> In his recent book about the "myths and stories of *Doctor Who*", Ivan Phillips asks, like other scholars before him, "what kind of hero the Doctor is".<sup>34</sup> Like characters from classical mythology, Phillips argues, the Doctor is "a composite character".<sup>35</sup> Phillips acknowledges that "the analysis is complicated by the fact that [the Doctor] is not only authored by many but also performed by many, each actor playing the same character as a different character".<sup>36</sup> He furthermore notes an "inflation of the heroic tone"<sup>37</sup> and that "the nature of the Doctor's heroism has been pushed to the foreground since the revival of 2005".<sup>38</sup> While offering the most complex reading of the Doctor as a heroic figure thus far, Phillips' analysis is limited to the narrow scope of a subchapter and neglects aspects of production and reception. To this date, the use of the terms 'hero' and 'heroic' in relation to the Doctor have gained enormous popularity without any substantial examination into the question of how the figure and the 'heroic' have shaped each other, both within the programme and in the wider cultural context of its production and reception.

This gap in the academic discussion of *Doctor Who* is surprising, as the heroic offers a lot of possibilities for the study of the series. With the corpus continuously expanding, it has become increasingly challenging to offer a comprehensive study of the programme. In 1983, the first academic monograph on *Doctor Who* already

<sup>31</sup> See Mike Alsford: *Heroes & Villains*, Waco 2006, p. 89; Robb: *Timeless Adventures*, p. 15; David Butler: Introduction, in: id. (ed.): *Time and Relative Dissertations in Space. Critical Perspectives on Doctor Who*, Manchester 2007, p. 5; John Tulloch / Manuel Alvaro: *Doctor Who. The Unfolding Text*, London 1983, p. 131.

<sup>32</sup> See Tulloch / Alvaro: *Unfolding*, p. 140; Marc Edward DiPaolo: *Political Satire and British-American Relations in Five Decades of Doctor Who*, in: *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43.5, 2010, p. 965. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5931.2010.00782.x.

<sup>33</sup> Valerie Estelle Frankel: *Doctor Who and the Hero's Journey*, New York 2015. For a discussion of Campbell's concept in relation to *Doctor Who*, see pp. 21–23 of this chapter.

<sup>34</sup> Ivan Phillips: *Once Upon a Time Lord. The Myths and Stories of Doctor Who*, London 2020, p. 173.

<sup>35</sup> *Idib.*, p. 181.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

remarked that the “massive number of episodes” had resulted in “a very complex and dense text”.<sup>39</sup> Since then, the number of stories has roughly doubled (by the end of 1983, 128 *Doctor Who* television stories had accumulated; as of March 2020, the canon includes 276 stories).<sup>40</sup> The question of how “you begin to tell the story of *Doctor Who*”<sup>41</sup> is thus still as relevant as ever. The programme can be used to study a wide array of topics: not only its characters and the ways in which, for example, their representation ties in with identity politics in post-war Britain, but also more general topics such as fandom (which has been the most extensively researched area in *Doctor Who* scholarship),<sup>42</sup> the BBC as an institution and even television as a medium. The heroic lens allows for all of these aspects to be included and thus for a comprehensive treatment of the series. At the same time, focusing on the heroic as a crystallization of a society’s identity allows the collection of the most pertinent and defining aspects of the programme.

*Doctor Who* is productive for the study of the heroic: it falls into the categories of fictional narrative, popular culture and television series, which all resonate with the heroic. First of all, heroes require narrative. Only when the lives of heroes are “imaginatively reconstructed and rendered significant” do they “become playgrounds of the imagination, richly inviting terrains for ideological projection and mythical speculation”.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, popular culture specifically “kept heroes alive throughout the twentieth century and preserved the element of enchantment that goes along with heroism”,<sup>44</sup> while literary fiction, especially in its modernist variation, “was a negation of heroism”.<sup>45</sup> Western societies at large were diagnosed to have entered a ‘post-heroic’ age “beyond the pop-heroism

<sup>39</sup> Tulloch / Alvaro: *Unfolding*, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> There is some disagreement about how to exactly count the *Doctor Who* episodes and stories (e.g. about whether or not to include “Shada”, which was not broadcast in 1980 because a technicians’ strike did not allow for its completion). The following serves as an orientation, though other ‘counts’ might come to slightly different conclusions: From 1963 to 1989, individual episodes were roughly twenty to twenty-five minutes long (with the exception of season twenty-two in 1985, which had 45-minute episodes). Stories unfolded across multiple episodes, usually four to six episodes formed a serial (the shortest serials consisted of two episodes, the longest, “The Trial of a Time Lord” (1986), of all fourteen episodes of season twenty-three). The 1963–1989 series consists of 695 episodes that form 155 serials/stories. During the 1970s, the BBC re-used many *Doctor Who* tapes, overwriting earlier episodes. A total of 97 episodes remain missing.

Since 2005, episodes have usually been forty-five minutes long, with the exception of 60-minute specials (e.g. the Christmas Specials). Stories have been contained within one episode or told across two episodes (‘two-parters’/‘double episodes’). Between 2005 and March 2020, 165 episodes have been broadcast, making up 138 stories.

<sup>41</sup> Butler: *Introduction*, in: *Relative Dissertations*, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Cubitt: *Introduction*, in: *Heroic Reputations*, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Korte / Lethbridge: *Introduction*, in: *Heroism in British Fiction*, p. 21.

<sup>45</sup> Anna Makolkin: *Anatomy of Heroism*, Ontario 2000, p. 123.



manufactured in Hollywood”<sup>46</sup> with “scepticism toward heroic avatars [becoming] more deeply entrenched in Western thought”.<sup>47</sup> Popular-culture heroes have remained in demand throughout the ‘post-heroic’ age, be it in superhero comics, genre literature (e.g. fantasy), blockbusters or on television. The medium of television, with its “familiarity, its centrality to our culture, that makes it so important, so fascinating”,<sup>48</sup> offers the ideal bridge between the extraordinary heroic and the everyday. The early years of *Doctor Who* coincided with a drastic rise of the overall television audience in Great Britain; by 1967, ninety percent of British households had a TV.<sup>49</sup> Television can “[show] us [...] our collective selves”,<sup>50</sup> and heroic figures play a central part in that process. On the small screen, the hero as an “object of some kind of collective emotional investment”<sup>51</sup> can materialize in the living rooms of whole generations and, as happened with the Doctor, an entire nation. The serial format accommodates the fact that the heroic “is not a realm of fixed and timeless meanings” and ensures that the heroic figure can adapt according to the “changing definitions and shifting constructions” of its contemporary context.<sup>52</sup> These manifold ways in which narrative, popular culture and (serial) television are entangled with the heroic strongly suggest that analysing a programme as long-living and popular as *Doctor Who* can be fruitful in both directions – to gain insight into the heroic in popular culture and to understand the programme in itself.

In order to gain in-depth insights into the heroic discourses within and around *Doctor Who*, the study at hand considers aspects of production, reception and fandom, as well as the programme itself, in relation to its socio-cultural environment. The analysis is based on a cultural-studies approach to discourse and understands discourse as the production of knowledge and meaning through language and practices of signification.<sup>53</sup> The analysis of *Doctor Who* will consider the heroic as both reflected and constructed in the programme. Beyond representations of the heroic *within* the primary material, case studies are contextualized within specific socio-cultural conditions. Aspects of production and reception, which feature

<sup>46</sup> Herfried Münkler: *Der Wandel des Krieges. Von der Symmetrie zur Asymmetrie*, Weilerswist 2006, p. 310: “Die Beobachtung, dass sich in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft unterhalb des von Hollywood gesteuerten Popheroismus eine postheroische Mentalität ausgebreitet habe [...]”

<sup>47</sup> David R. Sorensen: Introduction, in: Thomas Carlyle: *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, edited by David R. Sorensen / Brent E. Kinser, New Haven 2013, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> John Fiske / John Hartley: *Reading Television*, London 2003 [London 1978], p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Franz-Josef Brüggemeier: *Geschichte Großbritanniens im 20. Jahrhundert*, München 2010, p. 287.

<sup>50</sup> Fiske / Hartley: *Reading Television*, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Cubitt: Introduction, in: *Heroic Reputations*, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> See Stuart Hall: The Work of Representation, in: id. (ed.): *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Thousand Oaks 1997, p. 44.

prominently in the ‘circuit of culture’,<sup>54</sup> are considered in detail in Chapter 2 (“From Weirdo to Hero”) but also accompany the analysis in subsequent chapters.

The last element of the circuit of culture, regulation, will be neglected here because there is no evidence that regulatory attempts influenced the representation of heroism in *Doctor Who*. The most significant attempt to regulate *Doctor Who* was driven by the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association (NVALA) in the 1970s, spearheaded by its founder and conservative activist Mary Whitehouse. At the time, the NVALA was “actively engaged in monitoring television output to draw attention to what it regarded as unacceptable levels of violence” – and *Doctor Who* became a target.<sup>55</sup> After repeated complaints, the BBC “instructed producers to reduce the amount of violence”<sup>56</sup> but it is difficult to find concrete evidence that this instruction was put into practice. There is one exception to this: the BBC did edit the end of an episode of “The Deadly Assassin” before a rerun of the story, removing a cliffhanger that Whitehouse had accused of showing “violence of a quite unacceptable kind”.<sup>57</sup> Overall, however, the NVALA campaign remained ineffective because Whitehouse tackled the programme based on a flawed assumption – that it was “watched primarily by ‘little children’”.<sup>58</sup> Eventually, the NVALA campaign even had the opposite effect to the one intended: John Nathan-Turner, *Doctor Who*’s executive producer in the 1980s, once said that he would often “pray that Mrs Whitehouse had watched the programme and thought it was too violent, because it automatically put two million viewers on our audience figures”.<sup>59</sup> Overall, regulatory attempts might have influenced a few production decisions in small ways but remained insignificant, especially with regards to the heroic.

This study looks at the heroic in *Doctor Who* as the result of an intertwined process of production, reception, representation and socio-cultural context rather than focussing exclusively on one of these aspects. Additionally, it offers both diachronic and more selective perspectives of the material: A combination of distant and close readings enables an analysis that takes into account both overarching developments spanning decades and specific episodes and scenes. In this way, general themes in the series, such as the heroic emancipation of female characters, can be combined with analyses of how narrative and audio-visual set-ups medialize and present singular moments as heroic.

The first part of this study considers two processes of heroization spanning the entire fifty-seven years of the programme to date (1963–2020). The Doctor only became a hero in a complex process of production and reception, through cycles

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<sup>54</sup> See Paul Du Gay: Introduction, in: id. et al. (eds.): *Doing Cultural Studies. The Story of the Sony Walkman*, Thousand Oaks 1997, pp. 1–5.

<sup>55</sup> Chapman: *Inside the Tardis*, p. 112.

<sup>56</sup> Jim Leach: *Doctor Who*, p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> Chapman: *Inside the Tardis*, p. 113.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.



of memory, nostalgia and celebration. In accordance with Stuart Hall's theory,<sup>60</sup> the Doctor was initially neither encoded nor decoded as particularly heroic. Only after increasingly nostalgic memory of the Doctor led to decoding the figure as heroic did heroic features also find their way into the encoded characteristics on the production side. The (overwhelmingly) female companions, meanwhile, had to accumulate both heroic and narrative agency over the decades before they could become heroes in their own right, a process that culminated in the first female Doctor in 2018. Discussing *Doctor Who* in terms of these two overarching processes of heroization can easily create the impression that the series went through a coherent, homogenous development. That, however, is by no means the case.

The idea that the Doctor went through stages of impersonating 'different kinds of heroes' that negotiate the state of their respective contemporary society is oversimplified. Therefore, in the second part of this study, a more selective analysis of heroic moments in *Doctor Who* will juxtapose the two overarching processes of heroization. A time travel narrative such as *Doctor Who* allows for a differentiated analysis of how time and the heroic interact. The heroic requires a crystallized setting to appear, which the complex and contradictory present moment cannot accommodate. Narratives of the past and the future are thus privileged settings of heroic moments in *Doctor Who*. The past and the future offer more extreme scenarios in which singular heroic acts allow for a negotiation of contemporary issues and challenges in an emotionally tangible and, in fact, entertaining way.

### 1.1 The Temporal Paradox of Heroes

The relationship between heroes and temporality oscillates between the two rather paradox notions that heroes are, on the one hand, bound to their very specific temporal environment while they, on the other hand, transcend their time of origin and can potentially 'live on', immortalized in the stories of their extraordinary deeds. Heroes have been theorized as both temporally specific and universal entities; differentiating between momentary heroic acts and the gradual processes of solidifying established heroic figures that transcend their own time can resolve that paradox.

Heroes cannot arise out of an ahistorical vacuum. No matter whether they originated in 'real' life or in fiction, they are, as Max Jones has argued, "constructed by the societies in which they live".<sup>61</sup> Therefore, they should be "analysed as sites within which we can find evidence of the cultural beliefs, social practices,

<sup>60</sup> See Stuart Hall: Encoding/Decoding, in: Sue Thornham et al. (eds.): Media Studies. A Reader, New York 2009, pp. 28–38.

<sup>61</sup> Max Jones: What Should Historians Do with Heroes? Reflections on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain, in: History Compass 5.2, 2007, p. 441. DOI: 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00390.x.

political structures and economic systems” of their time.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Geoffrey Cubitt has stated that “two different periods and cultural contexts” can create “two ostensibly very different kinds of heroic image[s]”.<sup>63</sup> Certain periods allow and ask for certain heroes – yet some heroes ‘refuse’ to be limited to the time of their origin.

The heroic act is momentary and situated. It is narrativized *as heroic* at a specific moment of time (which might be, but is not necessarily, close to the moment of its occurrence), and answers to the values of that time. The heroic act in itself is singular and exceptional. The specific nature of the heroic act (for example the weapon used, the ends deemed worth fighting for, even sacrificing something or oneself) can be adapted to the cultural, social and temporal environment rather flexibly. Each new act deemed heroic can be potentially very different from the one preceding it. As it is adaptable, the momentary heroic act is also fleeting. If the hero is to last, the momentary heroic act requires repetition. This can, firstly, take the form of repeated heroic acts. Alternatively, the imperative of repetition can also be fulfilled by repeatedly narrating one or a limited number of particularly exceptional heroic act(s). Here, we slowly transgress into the realm of the gradual.

Despite the fleeting nature of heroic acts, it is indisputable that some heroes do last beyond their own lifetimes. When their heroic acts and lives are reiterated, their continued heroic status is ensured. They become a hero beyond the momentary heroic moment “by having [their] life and actions and character described in the conventional terms which govern the acclamation and celebration of the heroic within a particular society or culture”.<sup>64</sup> This kind of gradual process of heroization is inert, more resistant to change, and less flexible in comparison to one momentary heroic act that can be radically different from another. The re-interpretation of an established hero takes more effort and more time. This does by no means suggest that heroes are fixed entities, but it does imply that, as the stories about them accumulate, with certain characteristics repeated over and over again, they become more stable. Heroes that last are allocated “imputed meaning and symbolic significance”.<sup>65</sup> This is what Cubitt calls the “heroic reputations”: the “ways in which their heroic status has been established and sustained” in the form of “heroic images”.<sup>66</sup> These heroic reputations take time to develop through processes that include “practices of social, cultural and economic life”, amongst them “story-telling and entertainment, [...] gossip and news reporting, and [...] the circulation of literature, visual images and artefacts”.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 439.

<sup>63</sup> Cubitt: Introduction, in: *Heroic Reputations*, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

By differentiating between momentary heroic acts and more gradual processes of heroization, the temporal paradox of heroes as both situated within specific temporal contexts and potentially infinite for as long as they remain activated within collective memory can be solved. The heroic act responds to a challenge, a need, a crisis in the moment. These heroic acts are therefore very much culturally and temporally specific. Their flexible, fleeting nature allows for radical differences between one heroic act and the next, including the narratives thereof. The gradual process of heroization beyond momentary heroic acts and even beyond the hero's lifetime then leads to a more stable heroic image. The hero, in the process of gradual heroization, in Cubitt's sense, gains symbolic significance. This differentiation between heroic moments and processes of heroization informs this study of heroism in *Doctor Who*.

## 1.2 *Outside the Box: The Heroic in Doctor Who beyond Campbell and Other Conventions*

In order to consider the heroic in *Doctor Who* in a nuanced way, it is necessary to move beyond two conventions: firstly, the heroic clichés that have been in circulation in reference to the programme and, secondly, Campbell's concept of the 'hero's journey' that has been looming over the analysis of every popular-culture hero for decades. Campbell's theory of the heroic monomyth seems almost unavoidable, a kind of interpretative reflex in the face of popular-culture heroes. Campbell describes the hero's journey as follows:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.<sup>68</sup>

The basic idea of the hero's journey seems fitting enough for many popular-culture products, ranging from *Lord of the Rings* to *Harry Potter*, from *Buffy* to *Game of Thrones*, for which Campbell has been employed. However, even in the cases where Campbell's theory fits, the reduction of analysing heroism within that frame is problematic because it presents a circular argument: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell's complex and esoteric text, has been adapted into more practical handbooks for scriptwriters. One handbook in particular enjoys the status of a 'Hollywood bible': Hassel and Schärfl call it a "historical fact" that Campbell's concept massively influenced the film and television industries, pointing at Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers*, a volume that "simplified Campbell's abundant material and reduced it to templates

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<sup>68</sup> Joseph Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton 1971 [New York 1949], p. 30.

for narrative structures targeted at scriptwriters”.<sup>69</sup> Hassel and Schärfl participate in circulating the rumour that Vogler’s book can be found “on the desk of any Hollywood writer, next to the bible”.<sup>70</sup> This mythification of the monomyth itself leads to a circular reasoning between the production and (academic) reception of heroes in popular culture. On the production side, Campbell’s hero’s journey is used as a template to write scripts. To then use the same concept on the reception side in an attempt to interpret these products of popular culture seems redundant, even in the cases where it fits neatly.

However, *Doctor Who* does not fit into Campbell’s concept. Trying to force Campbell’s hero’s journey on the programme goes against its genesis in general and its protagonist in particular, as well as against all the ways in which the original idea has resulted in friction between Campbell’s concept and the heroic configuration of *Doctor Who*. The Doctor was not intended to be a hero. When the BBC team came up with the initial concept of *Doctor Who*, Ian Chesterton (portrayed by William Russell, 1963–1965), the young male companion of the First Doctor (portrayed by William Hartnell, 1963–1966), was supposed to be the principal hero.<sup>71</sup> It took years for the Doctor to move to the narrative centre of the programme and to be invested with more heroic agency, which ultimately came at the ‘cost’ of the more conventional, prototypical young male hero who, eventually, was erased from the programme altogether, resulting in the Doctor travelling with just one female companion most of the time. The Doctor, who does not come from a “world of common”, misses certain characteristics of the ‘Campbellian’ hero; the Doctor *embodies* the “supernatural wonder” that invades the common world rather than being challenged by it.<sup>72</sup> The departure and return to the everyday is a function that is outsourced to the companions. Yet it is the Doctor who possesses certain heroic superpowers that ensures their survival and return. In *Doctor Who*, the ‘hero figure’, in Campbell’s sense, is in fact a heroic

<sup>69</sup> Jasmin Hassel / Thomas Schärfl: Einleitung, in: id. (eds.): *Nur Fiktion? Religion, Philosophie und Politik im Science-Fiction-Film der Gegenwart*, Münster 2015, pp. 3–4: “Was sich als historisches Faktum hinter den Kulissen auch tatsächlich dingfest machen lässt, ist der Einfluss des Mythologieexperten und komparativen Theologen Joseph Campbell und seiner Schrift *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* und das vierbändige Werk *The Masks of God* auf so manches Drehbuch. Die Gegenwart der vergleichenden Studien Campbells in Hollywood wurde nachhaltig von Christopher Vogler möglich gemacht, der Campbells abundante Materialfülle auf strukturelle Erzählschablonen hin vereinfachte und dezidiert für Drehbuchautoren aufbereitete. Es geht nach wie vor das Gerücht, dass Voglers Buch *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers* neben der Bibel auf jedem Schreibtisch eines Drehbuchautors in Hollywood liegt.”

<sup>70</sup> Hassel / Schärfl: Einleitung in: *Nur Fiktion?*, p. 4. For original, see previous footnote.

<sup>71</sup> The amount of Doctors, companions and other notable characters can be overwhelming. I will introduce characters as carefully as possible. For better readability, I will not include actors’ names every time I mention a character. Should the reader ever feel disoriented, they can always turn to the Appendix (pp. 2283–286). The appendix includes chronological overviews of notable characters, along with actors’ names and tenure on the programme, which hopefully contributes to the navigation of the *Doctor Who* universe.

<sup>72</sup> Campbell: *The Hero*, p. 30.

configuration consisting of Doctor and companion, each of them providing some of the characteristics and narrative functions.<sup>73</sup> All this will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 2 (“From Weirdo to Hero”), but the influence and implications of the realization that the Doctor was not meant to be the programme’s principal heroic figure and the fractions that creates are of such importance that at least a brief clarification at this point seems necessary.

It is the ignorance of (or lack of interest in) the unheroic origins of the figure of the Doctor that has led to many of the clichés and simplifications regarding the reading of the heroic in the programme. Dedicated *Doctor Who* fans often read the First Doctor as a hero, albeit the fact there was little that could be called heroic about the cranky old man who spent most of his screen-time running from danger rather than facing and fighting it the way a more contemporary audience expects ‘their’ Doctor to. Some of these fans have become scholars, for example “fan-academic” Matt Hills,<sup>74</sup> “life-long *Doctor Who* fan” James Chapman<sup>75</sup> and Brian Robb, who writes that he is “proud to say that [he is] a *Doctor Who* fan”.<sup>76</sup> This way, the (mis)conception of the First Doctor as a hero has been transported into the academic treatment of the programme. Hill, Chapman and Robb have made invaluable contributions to the study of *Doctor Who* but neglected the unheroic nature of the First Doctor. Similarly, Tulloch and Alvaro, who, in 1983, authored the first serious academic publication on *Doctor Who*, an exceptionally comprehensive analysis in many ways, fell into the ‘hero trap’:

An example of this was the first producer’s [Verity Lambert] emphasis on the problem of naming (Doctor Who?) and her confusing of traditional narrative by introducing both a hero who always wants to escape (the Doctor) and a hero who wants to stay and help (Ian), so that the Doctor can be both self-seeking anti-hero as solipsistically concerned with himself as the Master later was and yet at the same time a heroic liberator of the oppressed.<sup>77</sup>

Within a few lines, they call the Doctor a “hero”, an “anti-hero” (without any specification of what they mean by that) and a “heroic liberator”, yet admit that he is self-seeking and always on the run. The simple realization that the BBC production team did not envision two heroes but rather one – the conventional hero (Ian) and his weird sidekick (the Doctor) – solves the problem much more convincingly than Tulloch and Alvaro’s self-conflicting attempt to read the First Doctor as a hero.

<sup>73</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Doctor and companion as a two-faced hero figure, see: Maria-Xenia Hardt: Hero with Two Faces. Processes of Heroic (Dis-)Appearance in Doctor Who, in: *Interférences Littéraires* 22, 2018, pp. 223–236.

<sup>74</sup> See cover of Matt Hills: *Triumph of a Time Lord. Regenerating Doctor Who in the Twenty-First Century*, London 2014.

<sup>75</sup> See cover of Chapman: *Inside the TARDIS*.

<sup>76</sup> Robb: *Timeless Adventures*, p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> Tulloch / Alvaro: *Unfolding*, p. 131.

Equally problematic to forcing Campbell onto *Doctor Who* are attempts to classify the Doctor or individual incarnations as a certain ‘kind of hero’. Again, these simplified characterizations reach far into the realm of academic writing. Tulloch and Alvaro have claimed the Doctor to be a “quintessential Romantic hero”.<sup>78</sup> Others have tried to periodize the series according to the different incarnations, at times combined with arguing that the ‘kind of hero’ the Doctor was changed with every regeneration.<sup>79</sup> None of this in itself is wrong. These are intuitive ways to look at the heroic in *Doctor Who*. The narrative element of regeneration almost invites the presupposition that each new Doctor, with “resulting changes in characterizations of the titular hero”,<sup>80</sup> can be adapted into the ‘kind of hero’ that was required at that point in time. This intuitive approach, however, is too focused on the result (the ‘kind of hero’ the Doctor is) to pay attention to the process of heroization; it neglects the aspect of boundary work as well as the intertwined nature of production and reception.

Furthermore, considering the ‘kind of hero’ the Doctor is moves on the level of heroic reputation, and, as we have seen, this level does not allow for drastic changes in the short term. The ‘kind of hero’ the Doctor is cannot be adapted quickly and radically enough to negotiate societal changes on a weekly or monthly basis. Of course, the configuration of the Doctor as a heroic figure can negotiate long-term change such as the increasing emancipation of women resulting in the Doctor crossing the gender boundary, which Chapter 3 (“Heroization of Women”) will explore. For the negotiation of societal issues that unfold within weeks or months rather than across decades, however, the analysis of heroic moments is much more suitable. Individual heroic acts can be adapted very deftly and smoothly precisely because they reside in the realm of the moment. While it is true that “we can never escape periodisation”,<sup>81</sup> we have to remain critical of the value and depth that it adds to our analyses. Sticking ‘heroic labels’ on this or that Doctor can easily result in clichés, and, like Campbell’s hero’s journey, that is a box we need to take *Doctor Who* out of.

### 1.3 Processes of Heroization and Heroic Moments in Doctor Who

If this study refuses to force Campbell’s hero’s journey onto *Doctor Who* and questions the usefulness of looking at what ‘kinds of hero’ different Doctors represented, then what does it intend to do instead? The first part, consisting of chapters one and two, considers two overarching processes of heroization, exploring how the Doctor came to be a quintessentially British hero in the popular national

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>79</sup> See DiPaolo: Political Satire, p. 965.

<sup>80</sup> Paul Booth: Periodising Doctor Who, in: Science Fiction Film and Television 7.2, 2014, p. 195. DOI: 10.3828/sftv.2014.11.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 197.



imaginary, and following the meandering course of the female characters in the programme from subdued companions to heroes in their own right. The second part, consisting of chapters three and four, zooms in on heroic moments of the Doctor, their companions and any other character who excels in moments of crisis. These moments of crises can be predominantly found in *Doctor Who*'s stories of the past and the future; analysing the narrative and medial set-up of the heroic moments in these episodes considers how they negotiate contemporaneous values and challenges.

Chapter 2 ("From Weirdo to Hero") investigates how the series' own production and reception history contributed to the Doctor becoming a central hero figure in British popular culture. It was the memory of the Doctor as the personal 'childhood hero' of whole generations that turned them into a *heroic* figure. This complex process resulted in fractures and rifts in the programme's narrative tissue that make the heroic configuration of *Doctor Who* rather unconventional and intriguing. While a few critics have commented on how the programme's content reflected British nostalgia for a grander, imperial past, this chapter also looks at how the Doctor became the object of nostalgia and how this played an important part in the figure's heroization. The Doctor is, as a time-traveller, not only an instrument to construct and circulate perpetuating narratives that are part of cultural memory and that circle around national hero figures; the character has also become an object of the very same process, especially during the sixteen years off air, in which the generations that had grown up with *Doctor Who* nostalgically remembered their childhood hero, securing the Doctor's place amongst popular British national heroes.

Chapter 3 ("The Heroization of Women") looks at the power struggle of *Doctor Who*'s female characters; it employs the heroic lens to consider changing representations of gender. Retrospectively, from a point in time where a woman wields the sonic screwdriver, we can read the back and forth between gaining agency and overcoming boundaries on the one hand, and the backlashes of being put in place and denied power on the other, as ultimately successful. The progression of female characters from 'damsels in distress' to heroes in their own right, however, was not linear, which shows that processes of gendered heroization are embedded into hegemonic negotiations of progressive subversion and conservative backlash. The chapter highlights the correlation between heroic and narrative agency: while quite early on, individual female companions were granted agency for heroic moments, they could not sustain the heroic potential because they lacked narrative agency. For a very long time, even superficially progressive companions were subdued to a narrative formula that 'required' them to remain secondary to the Doctor. Their heroic potential remained momentary. Clara Oswald claiming narrative agency that transgressed the boundaries of the companions' role led to a sustainable heroization of women in *Doctor Who*, a process that Jodie Whittaker's first female Doctor continues to explore.

Chapter 4 (“Heroic Moments and/in History”) and Chapter 5 (“Heroic Moments in Future Fictions”) look at how heroic moments order the past and imagine the future. Based on the assumption that “[p]ast and future are alike inaccessible [but ...] integral to our imaginations”,<sup>82</sup> these chapters explore how the possibility of time travel allows *Doctor Who* to negotiate the too-complex present moment through storylines set in the past and the future. The processes at work in narratives of the past and the future are similar: stories in these settings can be more intense, more extreme than the present. Collective memory processes have ironed out the complexities and contradictions of the past, and future fictions “on the borderland of our current critical condition”<sup>83</sup> push present challenges to extremes. Narratives of the past and the future thus allow for a focus that the far more complex present refuses. They are more prone to provoke heroic acts because they offer decisive moments of either-or, of overcoming boundaries, of survival. These two chapters suggest that heroes are either sourced from the past or directed at the future. Both kinds of narrative say something about the present – ‘the moment of production’; the present itself, however, remains a heroic vacuum that can only be accessed by means of a detour through the past or future. *Doctor Who* negotiates the complex present by means of ‘crystallized’ narratives of remembered past and projected future, whose heroes serve as catalysts of norms and values, answering to the needs, fears and challenges of society.

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<sup>82</sup> David Lowenthal: *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge 1985, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Veronica Hollinger / Joan Gordon: Introduction, in: ead. (eds.): *Edging into the Future. Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*, Philadelphia 2002, p. 4.