

Character as Medium: Don Quixote, Hamlet, Citizen Kane, Superman and the Doctor.

As a writer and academic, I'm very preoccupied with the question of what makes a story suitable for one medium rather than another. I direct and write in the theatre, and teach dramatic writing, both for the screen and the stage. A lot of my writing for the theatre has been in the forms of adaptation from novels. I also worked for several years as a scriptreader for a West End producer, specifically reading musicals.

All these jobs have involved me dealing with the same question – why should a specific story be told in one medium rather than another. Why, for instance, is the film of *Psycho* so much better than the original novel? Why do certain plays adapt well as musicals, why do some fail? – Stephen Sondheim said of the show *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, which he wrote with Richard Rodgers, that it was doomed as a musical because it was a woman who couldn't fall in love – who, metaphorically, couldn't sing.

This led me to thinking about characters who belong very firmly to their medium, to the extent that they've become metonyms for them. So, for instance, when we see an image of a man in black holding a skull, we read it not just as a representation of Hamlet, but of the theatre itself.. Similarly, a Spaniard titling at windmills, represents the novel, a millionaire dropping a snowglobe the cinema, and a colourfully-dressed alien the comic book.

And an eccentric time-traveller who occupies a police box becomes a symbol for television itself, for British television in particular, and the BBC in even more particular.

So... why do these characters occupy such an iconic position within their own medium? I'd argue that in each case, the character shares central qualities with the medium itself.

With the two earliest examples, Don Quixote and Hamlet, I'm not really saying anything very profound here. Both of these characters, created around the end of the sixteenth century, are presented as creatures of their media. Don Quixote is explicitly presented to us as a creation of (and to some extent a warning against) the power of the printed page, someone who's read too many romances of knight errantry, and lost his reason as a result. He is, like the novel, a creature of intertextuality, owing his existence to earlier writings, and aware of his own status as a character in a book – one of the books that sent him mad was written by his own author, Miguel de Cervantes, and in the novel's second volume, we frequently encounter people who've read the first. Prose fiction, unlike the cinema and the stage, is a subjective medium, one we read to gain an individual's perspective on the world, and Quixote's defining feature is his ability to rewrite the world in his own terms, seeing an inn as a castle or, famously, windmills as giants. Like the novel, Quixote has a very individual, subjective reading of the world, and one formed by earlier writings.

Hamlet is similarly direct in its self-reference, although unlike Quixote, he's not happy about the fact. In his most important soliloquy, the one that starts 'Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I' – he compares himself unfavourably to the Player King,

a man who can react more authentically to fictional emotions than Hamlet does to real ones. It's an actor's maxim that tragic protagonists aren't aware of the fact that they're in a tragedy – Hamlet is the great exception to this. Hamlet knows perfectly well that he's been cast in the role of the avenger in a revenge tragedy, and he's acutely aware of his unsuitability for the role – 'The time is out of joint; o cursed spite!/That ever I was born to set it right.' Like his medium, Hamlet is caught in the tension between character – in his case, cautious, introspective, detached – and action. Also, in a medium that's defined by its ephemerality, Hamlet is preoccupied with mortality – ask most people to draw him, and they'll come up with a young man dressed in black, either holding a dagger and contemplating his own death, or holding a skull and considering somebody else's – a professional entertainer, as it happens.

Move on four hundred years, from Elsinore to Xanadu – the two buildings do rather resemble each other, especially in Laurence Olivier's film - and we get to *Citizen Kane*. In this case, the self-reference is established early on, but then isn't referred to again. Almost the first thing we see – after the 'Rosebud' prologue - is a cinema newsreel, showing the public face of Charles Foster Kane. The action of the film is the way in which this representation is shown to be inadequate, through five different accounts of the character, sometimes conflicting, and none completely making sense without the other four, and the final, privileged view of the audience, which reveals the mystery set up in the opening moments. Sometimes, the action in one account only makes sense because of what we've seen in another – for instance, the story of Kane's declaration of principles, set up in Leland's story and paid off in Susan's. In a medium where meaning is created by the relationship between shots, Kane is a creature of montage.

A little bit before *Citizen Kane*, in 1938, Jerry Seigel and Joe Schuster introduced Superman, the first iconic character of the comic book, in *Action Comics* issue 1. He's the final survivor of another planet, Krypton, who is saved from the planet's destruction by his father, Jor-El, and sent to earth, where he's adopted by an American couple, Jonathan and Martha Kent, who raise him as a human. Like a lot of successful Americans, especially in the early twentieth century, he's an immigrant, and leads something of a double life, dedicated equally to both of his cultures – he's the Last Son of Krypton, but he fights for truth, justice and the American way. He muses on his dual heritage in the comic *Man of Steel* Issue 6, written and drawn by John Byrne:

'I can quote from the great literature of Krypton's ancient culture. I can summon before my mind's eye the great works of art. I can speak the seven languages of Krypton's proudest epochs. I can sing ballads of its heroes. I know the name of Krypton's god, and all the prayers that praised his name. This is the last gift of Jor-El to his son. And all of it is ultimately meaningless. I may have been conceived out there in the endless depths of space, but I was born when the rocket landed on earth, in America. I'll cherish always the memories Jor-El and Lara gave me, but only as curious mementoes of a life that might have been. Krypton bred me, but it was Earth that gave me all that I am, all that matters. It was Krypton that made me Superman, but it is the Earth that makes me human.'

He also, like many comic heroes, has a secret identity. Jules Feiffer has written, in a passage used by Quentin Tarantino in *Kill Bill 2*, that Superman's secret identity is

unusual among comic heroes in that with him, it's the human identity that is the masquerade – Batman is really Bruce Wayne in a suit, Clark Kent is really Superman in a pair of glasses. The comic strip as a medium was created by the intersection of two popular forms – newspaper strips and pulp magazines – and, more fundamentally, of words and pictures. Superman, with his split identity and parentage, is the archetypal character of a medium based on duality.

Before I get to the Doctor, let me say right now that these aren't the only characters for whom this has happened – for the cinema, I could have had Chaplin's tramp (like early cinema, he was a mix of low social status with higher aspirations) or Mickey Mouse, who even resembles a film camera. I could have done an all-female list with Anna Karenina, Hedda Gabler, Dorothy Gale, Wonder Woman and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, but then I wouldn't be here. I could also have mentioned opera, in which case I'd be talking about Carmen.

And finally... I realize that you're all probably way ahead of me here. I don't think it's controversial, this year is particular, to argue that the Doctor serves as a symbol for television in general, for British television in particular, and for the BBC itself. The trailer for the anniversary programme says 'Fifty years ago, television changed forever...' If you go into Broadcasting House as an audience member, practically the first thing you see is a gold Dalek.

The Doctor is a specifically Reithian hero – both an educator and an entertainer, created out of the tensions at the heart of the BBC, originally sold as an educational show, but then changed into something else through a combination of circumstances, including the influence of Verity Lambert and Terry Nation's creation of the Daleks in the second serial. The programme currently serves as a flagship for the Corporation, as *The Morecambe and Wise Show* did in the '70s, headlining the programming on Christmas Day, showing off the stars of other series – Catherine Tate, Peter Kay, John Simms – and serving as an index of television success – when Andy Millman in *Extras* wants to raise his profile, we see him playing a Doctor Who villain.

Like British television, he's an eccentric, full of unexpected knowledge, and a time traveller, especially happy in the nineteenth century, prime period of BBC costume drama.. Since the reboot, he's become a survivor, like Superman, the last of his race, which I believe echoes the status of the programme itself, a last example of Reithian values, a survivor of the cable and satellite wars. Also, since the reboot, he's developed a certain affinity with writers, meeting Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie and William Shakespeare (the last was the only character to see through his fake ID) – which links with the programme's identity as something 'authored', initially by Russell T. Davies and now by Stephen Moffat.

Because the Doctor constantly regenerates, surviving by change, the show's central visual icon isn't an actor but a machine, the TARDIS, which serves as a metaphor for the show itself, as on book covers, or the current logo. The nature of the TARDIS is established in the show's opening episode. After Ian Chesterton and Barbara Wright, the viewer's representatives, enter the TARDIS and comment on its spatial oddities, William Hartnell looks directly at the camera (I'm not sure if he does it on purpose,

it's always hard to tell with him) and says 'You don't understand, so you make up excuses..'. Then he turns to Ian and says:

'You say you can't fit an enormous building into one of your small sitting rooms. But you've discovered television, haven't you? Then, by showing an enormous building on your television, you can do what seemed impossible, couldn't you?'

Then he turns back to the camera and says 'What matters now is not whether you understand but what happens to you.'

(Notice by the way, that the Doctor refers to 'discovering' television, rather than 'inventing' it. The medium is presented as part of the natural world, rather than a creation of technology.)

The science may be questionable, but I think in that speech you can see that the equation is made explicit – the TARDIS is like a television. The speech is a well-known one, and is often quoted by Whovians. One thing I hadn't realized until I started researching this paper is that it's not in the pilot episode. It was added by Anthony Coburn between the pilot and the version that was actually broadcast, possibly at the suggestion of Sydney Newman. It's often said that the key to the programme's success can be seen in the differences between those two versions of the episode – in particular, Hartnell revised his performance, playing the character as more avuncular and less irascible. It's interesting that another aspect that made the difference was this first glimmering of the idea of the TARDIS as a symbol of television in general, and British television in particular – unpredictable, slightly old-fashioned and (all together now) bigger on the inside.