

# InterMission

## The Most Wondrous Things Glow From Within

In 2005, *Doctor Who* reappeared on screens all around the world. It wasn't a universal broadcast heard around the world, but rather a leak of the episode *Rose* that originated from a Canadian third party production house in which an employee posted a copy of the first episode onto the internet. Fans quickly downloaded the nearly finished episode (only the new variation on the theme was missing) to try to get their first glimpse of the revived series and of the new incarnation of the Doctor. While this was a leaked copy rather than one that had already been broadcast, it was a moment that harked back to the earlier days of *Doctor Who* fandom when tapes of old episodes were dubbed and copied for other friends and fans who hadn't yet seen a certain story. But this time, things were a bit different. This time the screen was a

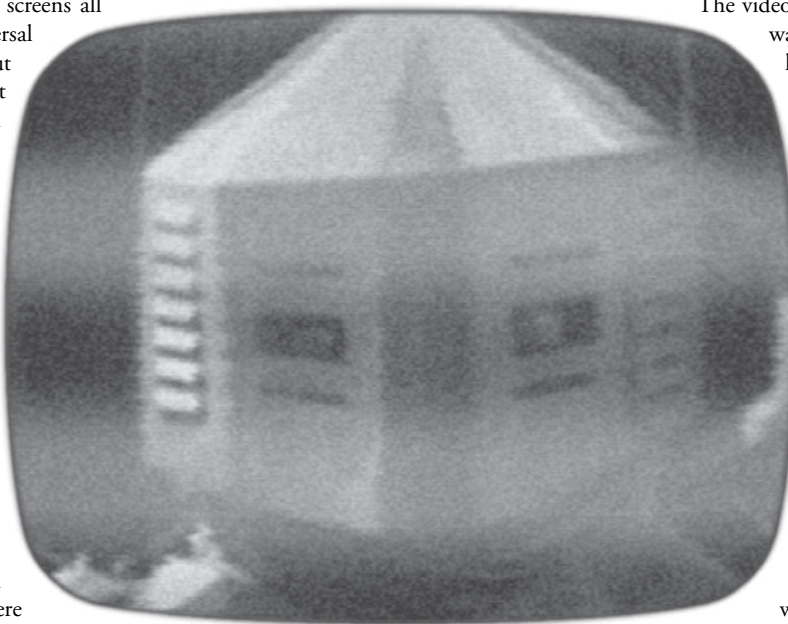
computer screen rather than a television, and this time the show was crystal clear and vibrant with color. This was a digital copy of a high-end master recording. There was something so right about the return of the series. And it also brought back memories of another period when *Doctor Who* "glowed"...

It was when I first went to see a rare *Doctor Who* episode at the local college that I learned that the most wondrous things truly glow from within. Their group had somehow obtained a copy of an older serial that had never been screened in the United States. This was a treat. It was something that I could not miss. I remember going with my friends, showing up early, and waiting for the program to start. A brief introduction by one of the members of the club and soon we were watching Patrick Troughton's adventures in the Land of Fiction from *The Mind Robber*.

My eyes were glued to the screen for every word and action. Only at the end of the first episode when the TARDIS was blown apart with Jamie and Zoe clutching onto the console, and the theme music and credits began did I really notice that the room was aglow. Truly aglow. I looked over to my friends and then at the walls and realised that the walls flickered brightly with dancing shadows. It was an aurora borealis created by the television set's cathode ray tube. Like the story itself, it was a magical moment – the Doctor, Jamie and Zoe, meeting Gulliver, avoiding white robots, fighting the Karkus, and outsmarting the Master of the Land of Fiction. But I never forgot the flux of brightness that came pulsing from the TV set as we watched the rest of the serial...

As I became more involved in *Doctor Who* fandom and sought out more of the elusive earlier programs that I had never seen, I would encounter that magical glow again. Watching a fan duplicated copy of *The Dalek Invasion of Earth* I became reacquainted with that flux of light from the television as the story unfolded. Other fans explained it to me. The UK had a different television standard to the United States. They had something called PAL that had a higher number of lines of resolution, and as much as I didn't want to believe it, was a better transmission standard than the NTSC system used here in the USA. The problem was that the two were not compatible, and one couldn't just watch a PAL video on an NTSC TV. Both the TV and the VCR had to be of the same system to play back properly. In the early 1980s, only professional conversions of the material from one format to the other were available, and these cost roughly about \$200 for each hour of video.

But fandom had created a solution for this. The adventures of the Doctor were too exciting and wonderful to have a technological incompatibility stand in the way of experiencing them. By taking an NTSC video camera and pointing it at a PAL television playing back a PAL video tape of a *Doctor Who* story, one could get a "camera copy" of the story in the NTSC format.



The video quality wasn't the best, but at least it was a copy that one could watch without having to buy a new TV, a new VCR, and import it without it being broken on the way across the Atlantic Ocean. As it turned out, PAL televisions had a different frame rate than NTSC televisions, and this created the marvelous flux of light. Some frames of the camera copy were brighter than other frames and the rapid brightening and darkening of different frames created what became known to many of us as "flickervision". These flickervision camera copies became the standard way to watch unseen episodes in American *Doctor Who* fandom for many years.

My recollections of flickervision start with Patrick Troughton's *The Mind Robber* but extended to the then current

batch of Peter Davison stories that had made their way to the States via the fan network. My first view of Colin Baker and his wonderful technicolor dream coat was through the assault of the throbbing glow of a television created by these camera copies. But the impact of flickervision went beyond this. Every single supplemental *Doctor Who* program I ever saw was seen this way. *Blue Peter* interviews, *Saturday Super Store* clips, *Jim'll Fix It* segments and more still remain in my video library in this format. Quite frankly, for all but a rare exception, this was the only way that American fans could watch these shows... or can still watch these until they start appearing as extras that have been converted for DVD releases.

But flickervision as it turns out was not just an American phenomenon. As *Doctor Who* stories were broadcast in the USA, before the BBC and other channels featured regular repeats, camera copies of stories from America were making their way back across the big Atlantic pond. Special documentaries about *Doctor Who*, such as those made by the New Jersey Public Television station, found their way back to UK for the British fans to devour. Convention appearances, news broadcasts from other countries, and even theater performances were camera copied. Flickervision was a part of the *Doctor Who* experience no matter where one was in the world.

Sylvester McCoy's stories found their way to the United States within six months of their original broadcast, so flickering copies of his stories barely impacted fandom. McGann's TV Movie appears to be non-existent in camera copy form in fan circles as the show was broadcast within a month around the world. But even at this time, simple convertors were becoming available and the glow was starting to fade.

With the advent of digital recording and conversion, flickervision seems to have been laid to rest, and the current generation of fans that are drawn to the 2005 series of the program will miss the flickering candle-light that seemed to attract so many of us like moths-as it did two decades ago...

Perhaps remembering flickervision will be a badge of honour for Whovians. One might suspect that within a decade, fans that remember the term or recall seeing episodes in this manner may be in the minority, as new fans and viewers rediscover the program in the digital age. It's easy to recreate flickervision if one so desires: simply start rapidly blinking while watching your TV screen. The effect is the same. But the real lesson here is that the warmth and glow of *Doctor Who* never came from the television itself, or even the flickervision we watched. It came from the characters, the plots, and the lessons we learned. That wondrous glow came from within the program itself, and hopefully found its way inside us.

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