

Doctor Who villains echo concerns about technology

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On the eve of Doctor Who's 50th anniversary, a bioethics researcher at the University of Leicester claims that one of the Doctor's most fearsome villains – the Cybermen – represent public concerns about the greater use of technology in medicine.

In their article "The Cybermen as Human," Dr Chris Willmott from the University's Department of Biochemistry and his former Research Assistant, Bonnie Green, reflect on ways in which the Doctor's metal-clad foe can offer insight into human enhancement and the development of the "posthuman."

The article reflects on the inspiration for the Cybermen, particularly concerns in the 1960s about the birth of 'spare part surgery'.

The essay appears in a new book, *New Dimensions of a Doctor Who: Adventures in Space, Time and Television*, edited by Matt Hills (Professor in film and television studies at Aberystwyth University) and published to coincide with the 50th Anniversary of Doctor Who.

Dr Willmott will also contribute to a discussion about some of the ethical issues raised by the Cybermen at the annual Bioethics Film Festival in Edinburgh, where there will be a screening of the episodes "Rise of the Cybermen" and "The Age of Steel."

Posthumans are seen to be a version of humanity with capabilities beyond those we could naturally develop without some form of

technological [intervention](#). In general terms this means attaining longer life, superior intellectual qualities, enhanced emotional capacities or some combination of these characteristics. Philosophers and scientists who are keen to develop these technologically-augmented humans are referred to as transhumanists.

Dr Willmott explains: "It might seem surprising to think of Saturday night telly as a useful vehicle for philosophical debate, but it has long been recognised that Science Fiction serves a useful role for speculating about possible developments for humanity.

"Our article looks at the Cybermen as one possible version of the Posthuman. The Cybermen actually refer to themselves as 'Human point two' in the 2006 episode 'Rise of the Cybermen', seeing conversion from human to Cyberman as 'the ultimate upgrade'.

"What we see portrayed is one of the classic dilemmas in modern bioethics - the tension between an intervention being a 'therapy' or an 'enhancement'.

"The Cybermen were originally conceived by scriptwriter Kit Pedler. His day-job involved him working as a medical scientist at a time when the first breakthroughs in transplant surgery were taking place. The Cybermen were his thought experiment about what might happen next now that 'spare part' surgery was becoming a reality.

"The therapy/enhancement tension is particularly well examined in the 2006 two-parter 'Rise of the Cybermen' and 'The Age of Steel'. On a parallel Earth, inventor John Lumic has been developing the Cybermen as a research tool as he sought a resolution to how he might survive his own degenerative illness. However the story finishes in a transhumanist's nightmare when he is forceably upgraded by his creations.

"Most people would agree that the various Cybermen storylines offer a pretty bleak image of the potential interaction between humans and Posthumans. There are, however, some philosophers who still argue that their ambition for pain-free immortality sits squarely with the goals of many humans.

"Over the years the details of how humans get turned into Cybermen have varied, but regardless of the mechanics of the conversion process, it has always been clear that the creatures within the shiny suits started out as people."

Despite their past effectiveness at exploring these issues, Dr Willmott is disappointed that the Doctor Who creative team haven't utilised this in recent [episodes](#).

He adds: "There has been a trend for the Cybermen to be used as bit of a generic enemy; the plot required an adversary and it was easier to draw on an established, and popular, nemesis than to devise a new baddie.

"I would like to see a substantial new storyline in which the nature of the Cybermen was explored more fully. However, I'd most like a new adventure featuring the Silurian's amphibious cousins the Sea Devils because they feature prominently in my earliest memories of the original Doctor Who."

This is not the first time Green and Willmott have published work on scientific and philosophical issues raised by adventures of the Time Lord. In 2011 they contributed an essay on Daleks and the definition of a Species to "Doctor Who and Philosophy: Bigger on the inside" (Open Court).

Provided by University of Leicester

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