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## “The Scrapyard at the End of the Universe”: Waste Spaces as Incubators for Uncanny AI in the *Doctor Who* Episode “The Doctor’s Wife”

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### Abstract

*Human society effectively others and marginalizes its waste spaces. This designation as a willingly forgotten, alternate place has inspired sci-fi (screen) writers to (re-)present dumps as sites of subversion in the otherwise ordered fabrics of their secondary worlds. One facet of this othering are the presentations of these spaces as incubators for new, and often dangerous, posthuman forms of life. In the *Doctor Who* episode “The Doctor’s Wife” (2011, written by Neil Gaiman) one encounters a waste space that gave rise to artificial intelligence. This AI came into being without any direct human intervention, thus subverting any creator’s myths humanity might cling to, but it also created itself out of the (technological and organic) material of the dumps, giving what human society deemed waste a new purpose – a process that even includes the reanimation of corpses. My claim is that the totality in which this and other AIs rethink the potential value of the waste material accessible to them is radical, uncanny and challenging to human sensibilities, especially in regard to humanity’s relationship to natural/technical resources.*

**Keywords:** *Doctor Who*; “The Doctor’s Wife”; waste space; Television; uncanny AI

Three people step from a blue police call box out into a landscape filled with trash and debris; in the background, jagged bits of broken-down spaceships tower over the scene. A blond man proclaims: “What is this place? The scrapyard at the end of the universe?” (“The Doctor’s Wife” 00:05:10). A dark-haired man responds: “Not end of – outside of” (“IDW” 00:05:10). This scene from “The Doctor’s Wife”, episode 4 of *Doctor Who*’s season 6, first broadcast in 2011, deals with core issues such as the question of environmental responsibility and an extreme displacement of waste-related spaces *outside* the universe. Not yet mentioned in this scene is the episode’s discussion of AI which poses questions of posthuman agency and inherent threat. Yet the core theme of the episode is waste, which is approached on different levels, first and foremost as a spatial concern by staging the episode on a junkyard planet. Here, waste appears as a physical force that shapes landscapes which enables the emergence of new kinds of life, and it also acts as a significant driver of the plot of this episode. Waste is shown to influence human behaviour and life and often threatens to overwhelm them. The episode questions whether this threat fosters a transition from the human to something new, something adjusted to these new landscapes – a posthuman entity incubated in a waste space. In the following, I will investigate how this *Doctor Who* episode handles these questions and which strategies of representation of posthuman entities are at work. I argue that in recent television and literary fiction, there has been a rise of waste spaces haunted and inhabited by uncanny non-human consciousnesses and/or artificial intelligences. I contend that

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these represented waste spaces are connected to our deeply divided relationship with the environment in general and with waste and resources in post-capitalist societies in particular.

The *Doctor Who* saga, with its fast-talking, alien protagonist has so far survived sixty years on air. It has offered an "incomparable window into the British imagination" (Sandbrook, 402), and been proclaimed a "pop-cultural artefact" (Robb, 10) as well as a "cultural phenomenon" (Leitch, 1), not least owing to its inherent ability to regenerate not only its main protagonist<sup>2</sup> (and the rest of the cast along with them), but also its range of styles, ideas and influences which critic Kim Newman has described in a much-quoted statement: "the blood-and-thunder Gothicism of Hammer horror, panto humour, conspiracy thriller, studio-bound fantasia, social satire [. . .] deliberate and unintentional camp, even ambitious philosophising" (3). The last point, philosophising, has been prevalent throughout the history of *Doctor Who* and has led to "an unexpectedly political programme that, through codes and allegories, seeks to comment on British politics and current affairs" (Jones, 49). Due to this political engagement, the series, both classic and new,<sup>3</sup> has picked up on environmental issues many times since its inception in 1963, attracting the critical interest of ecocritical scholars. The series' interest in and preoccupation with environmental topics have become even more pronounced since its relaunch in 2005, perhaps most notably in two episodes: "In the Forest of the Night" (S8 E10), where the twelfth Doctor had to figure out why the earth had sprouted a thick forest across its surface, and in "Praxeus" (S12 E6), in which the thirteenth Doctor encounters sentient micro plastic. The well-received episode "The Doctor's Wife",<sup>4</sup> the first episode written by Neil Gaiman, is seemingly less obviously about environmental issues and more about human and posthuman interaction. On closer inspection, though, it negotiates questions of environmental responsibility and resource management. As usual with *Doctor Who*, the plot of this episode is tight-knit and needs some (short) elaboration: Following a call for aid, the Doctor and his companions, Amy and Rory, end up on a junkyard asteroid that consumes TARDISes.<sup>5</sup> They are greeted by Aunt and Uncle, minions to House,<sup>6</sup> an artificial intelligence<sup>7</sup> that runs and inhabits the asteroid. The Doctor finds physical remains of other timelords and discovers that the TARDIS consciousness, the quasi-mythical 'Heart of the TARDIS', has been forcefully removed from the TARDIS hardware by House. House inserts this consciousness into the body of another of his human minions, a woman called Idris, to prevent the TARDIS consciousness from resisting against House fatally depleting the energy of the TARDIS chassis. Idris-TARDIS and the Doctor weld

<sup>2</sup> Twelve of the Doctors have been male, but the thirteenth has been female. Doctors Fourteen and Fifteen are projected to be male again, with David Tennant returning to play "the Fourteenth Doctor for three specials, before Ncuti Gatwa takes over the role as the Fifteenth Doctor over the festive season" (*Doctor Who*, np). Gatwa will be the first person of colour to take on the role. As the episode discussed here features a male Doctor, Eleven, this paper will mainly use the male gender pronouns, unless referring to series-overarching representations of the Doctor, which will be discussed in gender-neutral terms to include all incarnations.

<sup>3</sup> 'Classic Who' and 'New Who' are terms that germinated in fan forums and have spilled over into critical literature. They describe the eras of 1963-1989 and 2005-ongoing respectively and reflect the marked changes in the series since its relaunch 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Though the episode's title "provides a tantalising invitation, hinting at new insights into the Doctor and at some kind of family life" (MacRury and Rustin 199) there is indeed no such wife, at least not in the classical sense, apparent in this episode; instead, "the promise is kept, but in an unexpected and provisional way" (225); the title seems to refer to the close bond between the Doctor and the TARDIS.

<sup>5</sup> The acronym stands for 'Time and Relative Dimension in Space' and refers to the Doctor's time-and-space ship.

<sup>6</sup> House is referred to throughout the episode as 'he'. The embodiment of the TARDIS, Idris-TARDIS, is referred to as 'she'.

<sup>7</sup> The term AI is used in this paper as a shorthand. The character to which I refer might or might not be classified as an AI according to the definition of AI given by Merriam Webster, "the capability of a machine to imitate intelligent human behaviour" (np), which is closely mirrored by that given by the OED: "The capacity of computers or other machines to exhibit or simulate intelligent behaviour" (np). Throughout the episode, it remains unclear whether House is an artificially created being – a machine – or an organic creature. The usage of the term AI is still justified, as House displays behaviour which is commonly associated with fictionalised AI, such as control over other machines, as well as foresight, planning and logic. He also lacks a physical form.



together an ersatz-TARDIS from scraps to prevent this. Ultimately, House is overcome and purged from the TARDIS' systems by the TARDIS-consciousness herself.

The episode offers a lot of connections to posthuman encounters as well as points of analysis for the spatiality of waste, consumption and environmental destruction. The representative of these concepts is the entity House. He formed on a junkyard planet and is therefore born of waste. He collects abandoned and consumed things and also people falling through the cracks, all of which and whom he patches up and keeps running, creating monstrous creatures à la Frankenstein, and while House does not give his beings the spark of life, he alters them deeply in their biological and psychological make-up. The junkyard planet is depicted according to science fiction conventions, with a setting characterized by low-key lighting and a collection of miscellaneous objects such as a broken washing machine and the remains of erstwhile spaceships, giving "The Doctor's Wife" what MacRury and Rustin have called a "techno-necrotic, steam-punk, Burke and Hare feel" (202). This is House's place of origin. Whether House is an asteroid become conscious or an AI that has seeped from one of the discarded machines and taken root on the planet is not thematized. House is a non-human entity with abilities related to those of Artificial Intelligence - he seems to be a consciousness, with the crucial distinction that he can control machines such as the TARDIS as well as beings such as Aunt, Uncle and Nephew. These make up his patchwork family over which he rules as patriarch. Since House originates on a junkyard asteroid, he is a marginalized figure or figure of exclusion, not only because the asteroid is literally outside the universe, but also figuratively, as human beings often view junkyards and other waste-spaces with disgust and revulsion, and they aim to erase them and their inhabitants from their awareness and field of vision. One cannot displace something further away than placing it, like House's asteroid, outside of the universe. Not only are junk, waste, trash, refuse, items we handle in our everyday lives to the point that they become quasi invisible, or better: *unnoticeable* to us. Waste is also a social problem people are deeply divided about. Yet escape is impossible: "Every landscape is a trashscape [. . .] With our waste we have reordered space and place, reshaping them in its image the world over" (Thill, 4). "The Doctor's Wife" goes one step further in confronting the viewer with (presumably) human-made waste even in the farthest reaches of the cosmos.

Along with waste comes the concept of the abject as delineated by Julia Kristeva – paradoxically personified here by a being without a (visible) body whom I will nonetheless read as a creature of the abject. House's status as such stems not from his 'too clean' status – you cannot be physically cleaner than without a body – but from his close association with waste and techno junk. In expanding Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject beyond "corporeal reality" (Gross, 92) to include waste and trash, the abject then encompasses all the things humans 'produce' in the course of their lifetimes and would much rather not be confronted with as soon as they are done with them - the things they have separated from themselves that run contrary to their perception of whole, clean bodies and societies. As mentioned before, waste can evoke reactions similar in disgust, revulsion or even horror to those one experiences when suddenly confronted with blood or gore, as all of these show objects, beings and matter in their "ultimate annihilated state" (Thill, 8). This is one of the reasons why Western societies historically have been organised to keep "all the many discarded bits of our everyday material lives" away from us, maintaining a relationship "of abjection and removal" (Thill, 27). As Thill points out, eco-philosopher Timothy Morton has argued that "there is no imaginary "away" to cling to anymore" (27). Morton postulates an "ecological age in which we know full well that there is no 'away' – waste goes somewhere, not ontologically 'away'" (78). The fiction of separation and removal is shown as ultimately untenable by this episode's junkyard planet– the end product of unthinking waste production and removal to an unspecified "away".

House's very origin from waste, from things forgotten and thrown out, makes him a reminder of humanity's deeply troubled relationship with consumption and resource management.

But House as a character, and, crucially, as this episode's antagonist, is defined by other traits than just his place of origin. His first 'appearance' – a voice only – casts him as a beguiling, enigmatic figure unable to engender the trust of the Doctor and his companions. Again, House's depiction does not stray far from traditional sci-fi forms. The junkyard setting of the first meeting between the Doctor's crew and House is backlit and shown in low-key lighting supplemented by a green glow shining up through the floor grille. This green light assumedly is supposed to be a depiction of House's consciousness. Interestingly, the viewer is never shown what the Doctor sees when peering down the floor grille, leaving open to speculation whether or not there is actually some physicality to House aside from the asteroid he inhabits. When House later takes over the TARDIS, this colour scheme and problem in depiction is employed again; House taking over the TARDIS is shown as a swirling green mist engulfing it. What cannot be transported visually is here encapsulated in the voice acting of House: Michael Sheen's voice is warm and inviting while at the same time hinting at deeper, darker motivations (e.g.: 00:09:53 – 00:10:47). Talking to House, the Doctor tries to pinpoint what he actually is, but arrives at no clear answer. House is something not even the Doctor can classify – which associates House with the monstrous.

Whatever his nature, House's absolute control over his minions is among the most unsettling, fear-inducing elements of this episode. The effect is especially uncanny when he uses Aunt, Uncle and Nephew to speak through them, seemingly emptying them of thought and emotion to be his speech vehicles: They suddenly slump with lolling heads and glazed, fixed eyes, like puppets with loose strings. House's sway over his minion's life is so great that they simply die once House has distanced himself enough in the Doctor's TARDIS chassis. House's perverted family's existence is entirely depending on his goodwill, and to him, they are a disposable resource, in other words, they can be reduced to waste.

In the episode, the use and abuse of resources lead to waste, and questions about the way resources are positioned within the ongoing ecocritical reflection. House has emerged, one way or another, from the asteroid the TARDIS is lured to. The episode implies that House has been, from the moment of his gaining consciousness, in a perpetual struggle for energy or sustenance. Being in the world (or outside of it) requires something to sustain oneself on – existence necessitates consumption. House sustains himself on so-called artron energy, an energy produced by TARDISES. House is unable to generate artron energy himself, so he has had to find a way to get at it, and he does so by consuming TARDISES' energy fields, a process which will destroy the TARDISES<sup>8</sup>, as Idris-TARDIS recognizes upon seeing the wrecked spaceships: "All of my sisters are dead. They were devoured" ("TDW" 00:23:37). This is why House has lured the Doctor and other timelords before him to his asteroid and in the process accumulated a TARDIS graveyard on its, *his*, surface. In this non-renewable way of sustaining himself, House is a parasite, but, crucially, also reminiscent of a proto-capitalist: He takes over and drains every last available resource from those he lures to his asteroid. House's consumption and destruction of TARDISES resembles the capitalist exploitation of the earth's resources. Just like the capitalist system pretends to be blissfully unaware of the finality of the resources it consumes, House, residing just outside the universe, is unaware of the time-war and the fact that there will be no more TARDISES coming after the Doctor's

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<sup>8</sup> While not explicitly mentioned, it can be assumed that House has his minions kill the crews of the stranded TARDISES, as otherwise more people would be about in the episode; adding murder to theft.



TARDIS<sup>9</sup>. His consumption is his own demise, as he consumes to depletion, neatly closing the metaphorical loop to late capitalism.

Yet in this episode we do not solely encounter a negative depiction of non-human consciousness but also a positive one: The TARDIS serves as a representation of an idealized post-human consciousness. On the level of energy use, the TARDIS is an advanced species and a role model for conscious consumption and a sustainable future. Her highly positive depiction damns House even more. The TARDIS is able to use and refine an infinite energy source, which is called rift energy, to sustain herself. Crucially, the TARDIS also creates this energy herself by crossing time and space. This makes the TARDIS independent and self-sustaining as long as she can travel in time and space. In other words: instead of exploiting, the TARDIS lives with and even multiplies the energies that surround her. She is thus the opposite of House's capitalist consumption logic, her energy use geared towards efficiency and sustainability.

The episode pitches a disembodied and an embodied entity against each other, confronting the viewer with two conceptions of possible non-human consciousnesses which could not differ more from each other in their relationship to their environments and to humans. House has lured the TARDIS to his asteroid to drain her of the artron energy, something he can only safely do once he displaces the TARDIS consciousness hoping she will die off without her protective shell. The TARDIS's new shell is the body of the woman Idris, whose consciousness has been drained at the beginning of the episode. The TARDIS is, for the first time in the series' considerable run-time, able to articulate herself. As a spaceship's core matrix she was unable to communicate before this episode and will be muted again after it. Suddenly embodied, her struggle to come to terms with a physical form and with existing in just one spatio-temporal dimension leads to comic relief, such as when she explores the possibilities of kissing and biting, much to the Doctor's chagrin. Her repeated exclamation upon seeing the Doctor, of "My thief!" ("TDW" 00:05:49), points to another core question of this episode: that of agency and ownership. The embodied TARDIS is not a thing that can be handled anymore but a consciousness with her own ideas and desires. When the Doctor accuses her of unreliability in the past, the Idris-TARDIS replies: "I always took you where you needed to go" ("TDW" 00:25:32), thereby asserting her right to her own judgement and status as an entity, not an object, which is also underlined by the TARDIS having formed an emotional attachment to her thief. The eleventh Doctor regularly introduces himself as "a madman in a box", self-identifying by association to her, a reverse of the Victorian patriarchal notion which saw women as relational creatures only existing in society through their connections to men. The agency of the TARDIS over herself is brought to the fore in this episode, again connecting to the question of waste versus resources. The TARDIS herself was not the newest model when she was stolen, as she tells the Doctor: "I was already a museum piece when you were young", ("TDW" 00:17:11). This imagery actually fits in with how Idris-TARDIS, the embodied TARDIS consciousness, is presented to the viewer: she wears shabby, Victorian clothing and has unkempt hair, suggesting that the body she inhabits is a bit out of date, just as the TARDIS chassis is. While "museum piece" suggests a certain reverence, the very first *Doctor Who* episode, "The Unearthly Child" from 1963 starts out with the TARDIS parked in a London junkyard<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Very concisely, the Timelords, the Doctor's race of beings, were extinguished in a battle against their enemy, the Daleks, leaving him as the sole surviving Timelord. As the people creating the TARDISes are extinct, no new TARDISes can be manufactured.

<sup>10</sup> This collection contains another paper concerned with and ending in a waste space: Diane LeBlond's "Posthuman Encounters and Patterns of Care in *Klara and the Sun* (2021) or, What Ishiguro's AI tells us about the Uncanny Valley."



The TARDIS's status as potential junk connects to a concept by eco-theorist Marco Armiero, who coined the term of the wasteocene: the "Wasteocene is not about waste as an object. Rather, thinking of the Wasteocene means to frame waste as wasting, that is, as socio-ecological relations creating wasted people and wasted places . . . at its very essence, wasting implies sorting out what has value and what does not" (10). This echoes earlier ideas by Brian Thill, who pointed out that humanity "create[ed] human waste and wasted human lives all along globalization's dirty path" (4). One of the central figures of the episode, the TARDIS is declared waste and useless until someone comes along who views her with completely different eyes. This fits with a recurrent image in the eleventh Doctor's episodes (2010-2013): the viewer often sees him, happily doing whatever technical engineering timey-wimey thing is necessary to service his beloved spaceship. The entire series can therefore be viewed as a lesson in resource management: both the TARDIS and the series itself may not be the newest models anymore, but they will get you where you need to be.

The same shift in perceived value defines the pivotal moment in the episode, when the Doctor realizes that he is not just standing in a junkyard, but in something much more valuable: a TARDIS junkyard. This realization leads to the climax of the episode, with the Idris-TARDIS and the Doctor patching together an ersatz-TARDIS from the scraps of broken-down TARDISes which have accumulated on the asteroid to chase House, who is still in control of the physical TARDIS. Notably, this scene also illustrates the difference in perception concerning the patching up of the TARDIS, which is presented as positive and responsible resource management, and House's patching up of people, which is shown in a negative light. There is a difference between patching up machines and patching up human beings – but not to the posthuman being House.

Offering one reading of the AI as godlike creature, the Idris-TARDIS in the end of the episode is shown engulfed by golden light; she then sacrifices her active consciousness for the Doctor and his crew and goes back to being a passive, semi-aware entity. She finally appears with a golden halo, looking benevolently down on the Doctor, which hints to the series' conception of her as a higher form of being but also harks back to depictions in the run of the tenth Doctor (2005-2010), who was often cast as a "messianic hero", which John Paul Green has called "a worrying trend" (Green, 16). For the Idris-TARDIS, this quasi-sacred iconography underlines the notion that she is arguably post-human: she never was human and has abilities that diverge drastically from those of humans. Depicting her as a slightly goofy, yet removed entity is now and then undercut by her heaving bosom trying to strain free of the corseted dress; this slight disparity in the visualisation of a higher being hints at the difficulty in conceptualizing and depicting a consciousness that encompasses all of time and space in the body of a human. In the end, her return into the TARDIS, into a state existing in all of time and space, also comments on the inadequacy of a biological form to contain such a being. Indeed, her transgression of her improvised biological form and her return into the TARDIS chassis condemn the biological as a non-sustainable option due to its constant need for resources and consumption.

Compared to the god-like depiction of the self-sacrificing TARDIS, House, though disembodied, is more human-like than the TARDIS; he is more a slave to his baser instincts: his greed, but also his need for cruel entertainment. He uses Amy and Rory's fear to keep himself entertained while in control over the TARDIS chassis, and cruelly sees how far he can take the human psyche before it breaks. This is again visualized through colour coding: House's take-over of the TARDIS is tinted in a sinister green, while the TARDIS' take-back of her chassis is accompanied by a golden light. Kristeva claims that "abjection [...] is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles" (4). Despite his inviting voice, House is the very epitome of this



definition. His base need for violence is not something in the conventional expectation horizon for a being akin to an AI. The reader/viewer might expect cool calculation and violence which is logically justified and coldly arrived at. Here, where pain becomes sport, the genre is subverted, pushing House farther away from the category 'AI' and leaving the impression that what makes him scary is not his artificiality, but how closely he resembles human beings. It is in the end House's very humanity, his greed, spite and baseness which make him all the more uncanny.

House's existence challenges the fabric of society by his hunger; the TARDIS conforms to our expectations to the degree of dissolving back into a part of the machine when it is required of her. House's consumption habits fit with a creature from a junkyard. He stems from unthinking consumption and perpetuates this pattern; the TARDIS in contrast is a being in symbiosis with her environment and able to sustain herself nearly without external resources. It seems that the connection between waste spaces such as the junkyard asteroid and a form of negatively-connoted, uncanny AI or post-human consciousness is established through the human reaction to both: When confronted with either, viewers feel disgust, a degree of shame, and revulsion: they define them as the abject. Society has marginalized its own waste, which has given space and time for posthuman forms of life to take over. The spectre in the junkyard is not an otherworldly enemy, it is a reflection of humanity's homegrown guilt and fear. *The Doctor's Wife* confronts its viewers with these unwanted feelings, a confrontation which may lead to a moment of reflection, and, perhaps, to a reconsideration of humanity's relationship with waste. After all, "waste is every object, plus time" (Thill, 8).

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