“The Image as Eternal Life and Death: Uncanny visions in Doctor Who, Life on Mars and Harry Potter.”

Elizabeth Kinder

University of Newcastle

The moving image or uncanny other as it appears in the episodes of the “new” Doctor Who (2005-) series that focus on “The Weeping Angels”, as well as the television series, Life on Mars (2006–2007) and J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter sequence (1997–2007), provides a commentary on how the contemporary image functions in society. These works also examine how the image acts as a replication of the subject and potentially offers a form of eternal life, but only when an act of death occurs. This is achieved by attempting to see beyond the frame – whether that is the frame on a wall, the television screen, or the stone casing that holds an unseeable being – into a space where the uncanny lurks, a space we sometimes glimpse out of the corner of our eye. These replications (or “doubles”) of the original subject, whether they are presented as moving portraits or photographs, childhood memories come to life in an imagined world, or humanoid objects, such as statues that result in death the moment you look away, reflect a second self that exists in a space outside of time. What these works are exploring is the possibility that these images, via uncanny means, can escape the confines of their frames and re-enter the world of the viewer, recreating themselves into a physical existence.

How then, does the image – as depicted in photography or film – become a double or replica of the subject and thus, become a “specular” reflection? André Bazin describes the photographic image as the object itself “freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming,
the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model” (14). We can apply Bazin’s words here to the manner in which photographs and portraits depicted in the *Harry Potter* sequence, where – thanks to magic – the images of various characters contained within their frames are able to interact or move, seemingly in a world of their own. Reproductions of the original model are freed from the “conditions of time and space” in the Weeping Angel episodes of *Doctor Who*, where both the Doctor and the Angels utilise the power of television and digital recordings for their own ends.

Jeffrey Sconce describes television as “an uncanny electronic space in and of itself” (17) and that is clearly evident in the Weeping Angel episodes (‘Blink’, ‘The Time of Angels’ and ‘Flesh and Stone’). It also emerges in the series *Life on Mars*, where the uncanny space of television frames the world that the bulk of the series takes place in after the show’s protagonist, Sam Tyler, has a car accident (in 2006) and “wakes up” in 1973. There, the world appears to be shaped not only by his childhood memories and influenced by life experience, but also by popular culture: for example the character types surrounding him, particularly Gene Hunt, seem to have been inspired by television programs from the time *Life on Mars* is set, such as *The Sweeney*. The television also allows for communication in this world, providing Sam a manner in which to “receive” messages from the future – his present – and it is the basis of his terrifying encounters with the Test Card Girl, who escapes the confines of the television frame to interact with Sam, before reappearing on screen, smiling serenely at his confusion. Despite Sam’s encounters with the Test Card Girl taking place in the 1973 world that may or may not be real, these moments reflect how the role of television – or rather, the frame of a screen – continues to influence our own lives to a degree: whether it is passive viewing, as in simply watching a television show or a movie, or using the computer, everything is framed by a similar, rectangular shape.
Images within frames are not the only objects capable of – at times – uncanny movement in the *Harry Potter* novels. Thanks to magic, various statues in the novels (and films) are capable of movement and animation, although these statues seem to have no consciousness of their own and appear to be used as merely tools for either good or evil. In the final instalment, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Professor McGonagall calls the statues of Hogwarts Castle to life in order to defend and protect the inhabitants from Lord Voldemort’s attack and, as impressive as this moment is – both in the novel and the film – there is something unsettling about the idea of these stone figures suddenly “coming to life”. Stone statues, particularly angels, evoke an association with death: graveyards, crypts, or angels, and their appearance remind us of how statues are often created in the likeness of the deceased, of the human, which adds to their overall uncanniness. A statue is, Kenneth Gross explains, “almost by definition a thing that stands still, and what we call its movement is at best a resonant figure of speech” (xi), yet *Doctor Who* and certain instalments of the *Harry Potter* sequence present us with statues that defy this definition and, despite how it might unsettle us, we feel compelled to watch, to not look away.

Furthermore, Gross argues that there are “few ideas that can be more immediately haunting than the thought of a statue coming to life, few that tap a more fundamental wish”, and suggests that it is “one of our oldest images of the work of magic, one of our most primitive meta-fictions, something capable of unsettling our accepted versions of the real” (7). This is where the uncanny moment lurks: in the *Doctor Who* episode ‘Blink’, where the audience is first introduced to the Weeping Angels, we wonder if the character of Sally Sparrow did see the statue move, because only a moment ago, it was outside of the house, in the garden, yet now it is just outside the room. It must have moved, but that isn’t possible, because it is a stone statue and therefore cannot move. The Doctor explains to Sally, and the audience, from
a recording that, once put together, can be played and replayed anytime on a television screen:

No one quite knows where they came from, but they're as old as the Universe, or very nearly. And they have survived this long because they have the most perfect defence system ever evolved. They are Quantum Locked. They don't exist when they are being observed. The moment they are seen by any other living creature they freeze into rock. No choice, it's a fact of their biology. In the sight of any living thing, they literally turn into stone. And you can't kill a stone. Of course, a stone can't kill you either, but then you turn your head away. Then you blink. Then, oh yes, it can. (The Doctor, ‘Blink’).

We learn that the reason they cover their eyes and appear to be weeping is they cannot risk looking at one another: what has kept them alive for so long has kept them alone, for they can never be seen. The “frame” or rather, “encasement”, of the Angel is its stone appearance, and it is in the darkness – when your eyes are closed, when you cannot see them – that they escape the confines of their frame and kill you in, what the Doctor describes as a “nice” way: transporting their victims into the past, feeding on the potential of what their life might have been, while the persons lives on outside of their intended timeline. Despite their (at first) angelic appearance, they are the shadow, the unseen other, and they will murder you in a fashion that allows you to “live to death” outside of time.

As often occurs in time travel stories, a paradox occurs in the narrative, where we discover that the Doctor has all the information that the protagonist of this episode – Sally Sparrow – requires to defeat the Angels, but only because she gives it to him at the end of the episode. It is through television, or rather, DVD extras (Easter eggs) – the hidden or “unnamed” space on a DVD - that the Doctor is able to communicate outside of time (a Weeping Angel.
transported him to 1969) and hold a conversation with Sally in the present, complementing his explanation that time is simply “wibbly wobbly timey wimey”, rather than a straight line. Cinema is described by Bazin as “objectivity in time” (14), and “the image of things is likewise the image of their duration” (15), but, these stories are also demonstrating how the image can have an odd – or uncanny - influence on things within “their time” and this unsettles their apparent “objectivity”.

When the Doctor next encounters the Weeping Angels, in the 2010 episode ‘The Time of Angels’, the role of the moving image – a recording – is examined again, but instead of being used by the Doctor or his companions, as was the case in ‘Blink’, it is the Angels who exploit its power. A four second recording of a Weeping Angel, in its familiar pose – hands covering its eyes, back turned to the camera – confirms its presence on board a crashed star liner. The behaviour of the Weeping Angels in this episode is reminiscent of the Test Card Girl, who we know is free to travel in and out of the television set, yet Sam Tyler never actually sees her “step out” of the television screen: she only moves in and out of the world of the screen when Sam’s eyes are closed, existing in the physical world, it seems, only while he engages with her. In ‘The Time of Angels’, Amy Pond, the Doctor’s current companion, continues to watch the loop recording as the Doctor and a part-time companion, River Song, depart the room, but whenever Amy takes her eyes from the screen, the Angel shifts its position before it begins to break through the screen into reality – reminiscent of the famous scene from the film, The Ring (original 1998 and remake 2002), where a vengeful spirit climbs out of a television screen to murder those who watch a mysterious video tape seven days previously. In order to survive, one must “copy” the original tape, allowing the cycle to repeat indefinitely.

Whereas in ‘Blink’ the Doctor utilised the moving image to communicate outside of time and defeat the Weeping Angels, during this second encounter, the Weeping Angels are using technology to replicate themselves by invading the mind of Amy Pond through her eyes as
she stares at the digital image of the creature. The Doctor realises: “The eyes are not the windows of the soul, they are the doors. Beware what may enter them” (‘The Time of Angels’). Until this moment, the importance of maintaining eye contact has been vital to surviving the Weeping Angels, but now, this method of survival becomes sinister – not just for the characters onscreen, but as Alec Charles suggests, for the audience at home “who themselves have been staring at these Angels for some time, and even more so when we recall that Amy did not become infected by staring at an Angel in the flesh but when she was watching one on a television screen” (13). This is why there are no pictures of the Weeping Angels, the Doctor realises – too late – as he warns Amy not to look into the eyes of the Weeping Angel, because “that which holds the image of an Angel becomes itself an Angel” (Time of Angels 2010). In the following episode, ‘Flesh and Stone’, when it is discovered that the Angel from the video recording has entered Amy’s mind through her eyes – living in her brain’s “visual centre”, as the Doctor explains – it begins to “count down” from ten, making itself known and threatening her life, forcing the Doctor to figure out how to stop the countdown reaching zero before the Angels “take her”. He compares the situation to a television, saying that one would simply switch the screen off, before instructing Amy to close her eyes in order to stop the Angel from “climbing through” her eyes. At this stage, instead of simply using television screens to replicate themselves the Weeping Angels are using the eyes of the viewer and a new frame or casing is created – one that is perhaps, far more fragile than those encountered previously: the viewer becomes the screen and the replicated image, and the copied subject resides within them and threatens to consume them.

There is a suggestion, then, that the difference between what we consider “reality” or the subject, and the “image” is unstable and porous, defying “norms” associated with the image or recording, and this could be, in part, because in attempting to find the perfect method of representation or playback - through High Definition/3D or Blu-Ray DVD format – there is a
further blurring between the definition between the replicated and the subject. The Weeping Angel episodes, while dealing with science fiction notions of “monsters” and time travel, are not only addressing the uncanny elements of the image or other, but also commenting on the digital media – particularly television – that we find ourselves looking at every day. Images and copies, whether they are portraits, recordings or statues, are intended to represent life and allow an extension of life after death, such as a doubling or an existence outside of time, but while there is a second life or after-life of sorts achieved here, it is only accomplished through death. Charles explains that “the reality portrayed on television is the reality portrayed by television: the television within the fictive world portrays the fictive world, just as the television within the material world does” (17). What these Doctor Who episodes are doing, like Life on Mars, is enhancing the blur between the worlds – that is, the physically real worlds versus the digital “other” worlds depicted in these works.

This blurring of subjects and images, of static beings “coming to life” when we turn our backs or look away, highlights society’s dependence and fear of the image: not only can it become a double or a reflection, it can in fact kill us, become us – or we can become it. Part of the fascination we have with the image is linked to a fear that it could replace us, reminiscent of the fear of technologically inspired post-human beings, such as the “cyborg”, but here we are seeing an examination – in part – of the manner in which we project ourselves. For example, in the ever-expanding world of online social networking, users select a “profile picture” or an “avatar” to represent themselves when they interact with online peers. Rarely is this image an unflattering photograph. On the contrary, if it is actually a “true” photograph of the person, it is usually selected because it presents a “perfect” self to the digital world. Thus, in creating our online doubles, there is often a sense that they replace the real us. There is also the danger of the image to consider: that it may escape its frame or casing and enter the “real” world, both when we are looking and when we are not looking.
*Doctor Who*, *Life on Mars* and the *Harry Potter* sequence are all examining the role of the image and depicting it in uncanny ways that reinforce its potential danger. By adding the elements of magic and science fiction to the uncanny, the idea that – in the blink of an eye – these representations of the human might escape the confines of their frames (or stone structures) suddenly becomes frightening, because there is suddenly a real possibility that these uncanny images can replace or destroy us, the original subject they are reflecting.

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Works cited.


