Editor’s Letter

by Dickon Ross

So, has it been 50 years of pleasure or pain? Do you love or hate Doctor Who? Perhaps one of the other TV science-fiction programmes caught your imagination more...

IF YOU DON’T recognise the police box on this month’s cover you probably haven’t been exposed to a curiously British (though intergalactic) institution – and it must seem like a pretty wayward telecoms reference.

If you haven’t seen Doctor Who, well, where to start? It’s a TV programme that has been running (on and off) for 50 years. Part science-fiction and part fantasy, it has evolved from shaky sets and shaky acting in black and white to over-the-top special effects, over-acting and over-sentimental Christmas specials.

What else? Well, Doctor Who is a ‘Time Lord’ who travels through time and space in this police box called the ‘TARDIS’, which is bigger on the inside than the outside. He carries a ‘sonic screwdriver’ (see p30), is often accompanied by a attractive young assistant. Generations of children have hidden behind the sofa from the Doctor’s arch enemies the Daleks (see p98) and the Cybermen, part man, part machine. But if all that is not weird enough, the strangest thing of all about this TV programme is that it is also followed by many adults.

The idea of this is to boldly go – or, if you prefer, to go boldly – and explore the relationship between sci-fi and engineering. On p30, Paul Dempsey talks to the Doctor’s technical advisor tells scientists to find what it is that makes a piece of sci-fi absurd or inspirational or both.

Stanley Kubrick was a ‘maniac’ for detailed accuracy, his technical advisor tells us. Find out how ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’ foresaw the future, from tablets to Skype, on p48. On p80 we venture into the ‘uncanny valley’ with the pros and cons of making robots like humans or, well, like robots.

The Cybermen were inspired by real-life technological advances but Jason Goodyer hears a more optimistic view of cyborgs from flamboyant futurist Jose Cordeiro on p72. And on p60 we look at ten sci-fi staples from ray guns to flying cars and asked whatever happened to them in real life.

Which comes first, the fact or the fiction? “There is a strange thing where fact feeds off sci-fi and sci-fi feeds off fact,” Geoff McCormick, director of experience-led design at the Alloy Group explains in our feature on sci-fi and design on p52. “They both inspire each other and so are both driven off one another.”

“I see this as a virtuous circle,” sci-fi author Stephen Baxter told Nick Smith in this month’s interview with him and co-author Sir Terry Pratchett (p40). “It’s a feedback loop of the imagination.”

Finally, Doctor Who was also important for its theme tune, by Delia Derbyshire for the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. This issue’s cover line did spark some disagreement in the editorial office: should it be “rumbletum, rumbletum, rumbletum, 000-EEEEoooooo, OOO0000” or “Dum-de-dum, dum-de-dum… Woo-ooo!” You decide. And if you’re aware of an even madder sci-fi series from anywhere on this or other planets, please tell us about it.

OPINION