

Et in Arcadia ego

City of Death

by Matthew Kilburn

City of Death is justly celebrated, even inspiring academic papers to consider why it is ‘the best *Doctor Who* story’. The script’s credit, ‘by David Agnew’, hides Douglas Adams and Graham Williams reworking

a storyline by David Fisher. Revisiting it, the story’s attitude to history and the interplay between the concepts of ‘life on Earth’ and ‘the human race’ are prominent concerns. The two are elided in dialogue, but this is probably a deliberate choice, foreshadowing the promotion of the 2005 series of *Doctor Who* as ‘adventures in the human race’. This season in particular is concerned with human beings’ potential to change their environment for the better, normally by contrasting that potential with one individual who has made a bad choice. Scaroth self-identifies as the last of the Jagaroth, but in living across centuries, in fragments, literally within a human skin (which presumably has somehow evolved alongside life on earth, and grows back after he tears it off every so often) and being (as he boasts) integral to human scientific and technological achievement, he has surely nurtured a human race in his own image.

Scaroth is as human as the beings he regards as his tools. Scaroth has been the fellow-labourer, the counsellor, the lover of human beings. He has reason; he is able to make moral choices. Scaroth views his splintered career as a single-minded effort by a sole author, but it is actually one of collaboration, not only between his distinct selves but between Scaroth and humanity. Scaroth only sees the technological advances which would help him, and the Doctor’s visit to Leonardo underscores this. The helicopter blueprint is left to one side, but in mentioning it the script leaves the audience to infer that it’s not part of Scaroth’s plan, as Leonardo has been called away to work on multiple Mona



Lisas. For Scaroth, art can be beautiful but is finally a means to an end; for the Doctor, it has intrinsic merit distinct from any material purpose, proclaimed by the scrawling of 'THIS IS A FAKE' on Leonardo's canvases.

The Doctor's status as scientist is invoked repeatedly, but he is also emphatically a man of the arts, recognizing a Louis *Quinze* chair, reminiscing with the absent Leonardo about painting the original *Mona Lisa*, pointing out his own handwriting as evidence of his editorial role in *Hamlet* (from which he then quotes) and presenting the TARDIS as an exhibit in a modern art gallery. The Doctor is also more socially relaxed than his opponent. His response to being imprisoned by Scaroth's Tancredi persona is to attempt to strike up a rapport with the guard, an echo of *Doctor Who*'s earlier aspiration to concentrate on the ordinary people caught up in events, with the historical personalities kept offstage or to the side. As well as providing black comic relief, the guard helps anchor the scene in sixteenth-century Italy by collapsing the gap between present and past using twentieth-century idiom: 'When you've worked for the Borgias, you'll believe anything.'

Scaroth, meanwhile, is the embodiment of a great man theory of history. Had he been able to stop his earlier self taking off, all other perspectives on human development would have been crushed. The Doctor's speech to Scaroth, warning him that he can't change history, recalls his admonition to Barbara in *The Aztecs*, which may well have been watched by the eleven-year-old Douglas Adams. Adams is also aware that since then the historic past in *Doctor Who* has become mutable, as seen in *Pyramids of Mars*. In this context the Doctor is appealing to Scaroth to be content with the life and lives he has already experienced: in what might be a holdover from the script's earlier form as *A Gamble with Time*, set in the casinos of Monte Carlo, the Doctor tells him he only has one throw of the dice. If someone rigs the tables like Scaroth, the system can be broken, in this case with one punch: Duggan's.

The Doctor's view of human development is shaped by his belief in listening to and learning from multiple voices throughout history. He pays attention to different interpretations and alternative ideologies while retaining his own moral perspective. Scaroth can hear several voices too, but they are all his own, and his attempt to force his reinterpretation of a crucial event on the world is doomed because of his limited self-knowledge and refusal to acknowledge the agency of those he lives among.

