

The END of the UNIVERSE

A history

William Shaw



IF THERE'S ONE PLACE WHERE THE UNIVERSE SHOULDN'T END, it's **Doctor Who**. This is the series that can go anywhere, with potential for an infinite number of stories, so the decision to impose such a deliberate end point feels counter-intuitive. Entropy is the one rule to which even the Doctor will bend; the moment can be prepared for, but it can't actually be avoided.

Stories where the end of the universe is threatened are fairly common. Ones where it is actively visited are rare. Three of those are *Logopolis*, *Utopia*, and *Listen*. Three very different stories from very different writers, with very different views on the end of all things. But in their mad, contradictory way, they can tell us about who the Doctor is within his world, and what it might look like the next time it ends.

The Master

Now, what's he doing here? All three of our stories involve, or at least invoke him. He shows up halfway through *Logopolis* and *Utopia*, and of course there's the strange knocking in *Listen*. What makes the Master, as a villain, so well-suited to the end of creation? Partly it's because he's an individual. The Daleks and the Cybermen are too big, and too impersonal a threat — if they're not causing the apocalypse, then there really isn't a place in the story for them. Scrabbling in the dirt as the stars go out isn't their style. But it's perfect for the Master. He's the Doctor's not-quite equal and opposite number, his villainy petty enough to make a nice contrast with the grandeur of the end of the universe. As the world collapses, we turn inwards and start fighting ourselves. The Master, in this scenario, becomes pretty much the only villain to pick.

It's important to note that the Master does not *want* the universe to end, and he is pointedly not in control of any of these stories. In *Logopolis* he seemingly causes the end of the universe by accident, killing the wrong man and destabilising everything. In

Explosion of EV Lacertae. Image: Casey Reed/NASA

Utopia he's explicitly in hiding, having fled to the end of the universe to escape the Time War. This partly extends from the power of the setting; the Master is not allowed mastery of anything, because the very concept of 'anything is on the way out.

The Doctor

The Master, at least, gets to be renewed. Having emerged from a clock to claim the body of a kindly old man just before *Logopolis*, and having done the same in *Utopia*, the end of the universe is a regenerative experience, which is part of his perverse nature. The Doctor, on the other hand, does not have that comfort — he can only regenerate in *Logopolis* once the universe has been saved, and he comes out of *Utopia* scarred and regretful. *Listen* is trickier, but its timey-wimey aspect makes it less regenerative than simply generative. So, let's look at the one thing that happens to the Doctor in all three stories: entrapment.

In his book *Recursive Occlusion*, Philip Sandifer argues that the nature of **Doctor Who** is to constantly confine things within a box - to occlude recursively, if you will, by creating fantastical worlds and containing them within the medium of television. Or, to put it another way, television is always bigger on the inside. But, crucially, the Doctor himself is in some sense immune to this occlusion, if only by his ability to constantly move between occluded settings. In *Logopolis*, this ceases to be the case. This is the real horror of the episode two cliffhanger, as the TARDIS starts to shrink with the Doctor still inside it. The Doctor has finally been contained by his box, and it shrinks as the universe shrivels around it. The Doctor is trapped again at the end of *Utopia*, and again the TARDIS is used against him, as the Master steals it and runs off. The TARDIS is not so much destroyed by the end of the universe as infected by it, the series' storytelling engine turning against the hero as a natural consequence of entropic decay. *Listen* also has the Doctor trapped in a box, specifically the mysterious base at the end of the universe, and it's a box that can't be opened — we get only the vaguest hint of what happens when he does open the airlock, before Orson snatches him back from the brink.

Once the universe has shrunk into a box, it can't be opened again. In the real world, the universe will probably end with what physicists call the Great Contraction. In the opposite of the Big Bang, the universe will implode with all matter condensed back into a single point. The universe collapses inwards, and it crushes the Doctor in doing so. Or rather, it should. But it doesn't. *Logopolis* and *Listen* both involve the Doctor being haunted by a mysterious watcher, and both end with the realisation that it was the



Doctor all along. The Doctor is able to escape because he is being watched; and in point of fact, he is: by us, on a television screen. The viewer is the spectre haunting these stories, and the Doctor escapes death by folding our identities into his own. He survives because we, as viewers, want him to survive. The cost of survival is being watched; we become both Doctor and companion.

The People

Where's there's life, there's... Actually, there's a thought. Continuing our theme of *Logopolis* and *Utopia* as secret cousins, both of them involve a rather populous vision of the end times, as well as a bunch of structural similarities. Both of them have one-word titles referring to an idealised setting. This is standard practice for Christopher H. Bidmead, who later writes *Castrovalva* and *Frontios*, but decidedly less so for Russell T.

Davies — the only other example, *New Earth*, still contextualises the setting to some degree. Moreover, *Utopia* is a place our main characters never see. The promised diamond-skies give way to nothing, nothing but the dark and the cold, so horrifically empty we only hear about it second-hand, from the monsters it creates. It's tempting to put this down to pure cynicism, and Davies is undoubtedly a more pessimistic writer than Bidmead — in *Logopolis* the Platonic Ideal city is a crucial setting, while in *Utopia* it's pure fantasy.

Utopia acts as a dark mirror for *Logopolis*, and not just by introducing the Master halfway through. The Conglomeration looks like an abandoned, half-decayed version of *Logopolis* itself, and the reveal of the Futurekind within the Silo is almost identical to the reveal of the Master hiding in the Logopolitan's cell. Both stories contain lots of corridors lined with people, but while in *Logopolis* those people are binary monks maintaining the integrity of the universe, in *Utopia* they're refugees; the end of the universe has gone from being a maths problem to a social one. Davies's pessimism flares up mightily here, with the implication that humanity's future is tribal cannibalism, but it only gets worse in the following story, with the introduction of the Toclafane. The Futurekind kill because they are hungry. The Toclafane, by their own admission, kill because it's fun. Even worse, we're told this by the creature that used to be Creet, the kid who won a *Blue Peter* competition and got to go to the end of the universe. It's a piece of cynicism worthy of Robert Holmes. The quiet, almost religious ideal of *Logopolis* has decayed into a visceral human cruelty.



The Companions

A single conversation, on the surface of Logopolis. A tearful, bereaved young woman. Two hurt, betrayed accusations. A reference to 'the creature that killed my father', and a declaration that 'the man's a murderer!' Thus end the attempts of **Doctor Who** to demonstrate that the Master killing Nyssa's father and wearing him as a skin suit has any emotional effect on her whatsoever. The end of the universe is no place for emotion. Or so goes the logic. The trouble is, there doesn't seem to be any other place for it either.

A chamber flooded with red light. A single, guarded conversation. Some awkward, laboured banter. An admission of the Doctor's prejudice. He tells Jack that he is a Fact, and his instinct is to flee from Facts. Cold, remorseless logic is still present, but it is now a thing to be feared rather than embraced. The universe has ended — this is exactly the place for emotion. But in our stunted, charismatic, post-traumatic hero, that emotion has yet to fully emerge.

A voice in the dark. A nervous first kiss. A word, underlined: Listen. We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to return where we started, and know the place for the first time. The universe has ended again, but, for the first time, that end is less important than Clara's response to it. It's a response which acknowledges the facts, and the fear attached to them, but refuses



to be controlled by either. Fear makes companions of us all. This, at last, is progress.

The Consequences

In *Logopolis*, the Doctor escapes, and then dies. In *Utopia*, the Doctor is trapped, then escapes, and the Master dies. In *Listen*, the Doctor almost dies, before Clara goes back and gives him the lesson that will make him the Doctor, and, ultimately, lead him to this moment. Where *Logopolis* and *Utopia* form a straight line, *Listen* is a circle, one which connects the previous two stories, and addresses the flaws of both.

Logopolis is emotionless: a slow draining of colour and warmth, leaving only cold, hard symbolism. The universe operates on an explicitly computational logic; its ending is baffling and violent, yet oddly sterile. *Utopia*, on the other hand, is full of emotion, from the visceral horror of the Futurekind to the mounting dread of the Master's revelation. It's emotional, but the emotion it offers is entirely negative, the one sliver of hope cruelly dashed in the following episode. *Listen*, meanwhile, offers a synthesis of the two: its vision of the end is as sterile as *Logopolis*, but by centring itself on Orson's fear it avoids succumbing to that sterility itself.

Listen's response to *Utopia* is similarly clever. Yes, the end of the universe is scary, but rather than giving into that fear, we can embrace and control it. By doing so, we escape its crushing emotional weight. Moffat's vision is undoubtedly more optimistic than Davies's, but it's no less open about the facts; the end of the universe is an object of fear. But that fear doesn't have to make us cruel or cowardly. Instead, we can use the knowledge of that end as a motivation to act while the universe still stands, turning the end from a depressing fact to a motivational one. The moment is coming, so we'd better start preparing for it.

This, then, is how the Doctor escapes the end of the universe; by accepting it. Once accepted, the event has no power over him, and can even be revisited. In *Hell Bent*, the Doctor pops to the end of the universe for a quick chat with Ashildr, and it plays out almost casually — he no longer views the end as a threat, and so it loses its ability to threaten. To deny the end its emotional power is also to deny its symbolic power, but it's a denial that requires emotional awareness rather than repression. Face the end openly, honestly, and bravely, and you can walk away, changed, but indomitable. This is the way the world ends: not with a bang, but with a wheezing, groaning sound.

