

What is Cult TV

- Cult TV can be thought of as a group of texts, often hailing from the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror
- Secondary texts or inter-texts play a role in providing additional information about the television programme e.g. commercial fan magazines
- Cult television is not predominantly a matter of programmes themselves or audiences, it is constructed through inter-textuality
- Through secondary texts that activate the meanings and associations of cult for audiences
- Cult status arises through an audience's passion for a TV show
- This positions cult TV as a grassroots phenomenon
- Assuming it is created by fans rather than by producers
- Such a view emphasises and celebrates fan audience power

Hyperdiegesis

- The fantastic nature of these hyperdiegetic worlds is also significant
- It provides each textual world with distinctive and characteristic rules for its operation
- In the narrative world of *Doctor Who* the character of the Doctor is a Time Lord who can regenerate into different bodies
- Science fiction/fantasy/horror varieties of cult TV often render the fantastic diegetically commonplace by virtue of defining and developing fantastic beings
- The fantastic takes on a quality of everydayness by virtue of its repetition
- The hyperdiegesis – works serially by reiteration and accumulation of detail
- To make fantastic worlds appear normal within a format and narrative structure
- In order to keep alive the sense of fantastic disruption – or to stop the narrative worlds of cult TV shows from becoming entirely familiar to their audiences
- Cult texts must play with their own established norms and rules

Balance

- Cult TV texts offer a delicate balance between establishing detailed narrative continuity which can be trusted and appreciated by audiences
- And breaking with or altering this continuity in order to preserve audience interest
- It is such a balancing act that arguably has led to the interest cult TV shows have displayed in temporarily re-working their usual formats
- Characters and character relationships can be temporarily redefined without affecting the standard seriality of the shows concerned
- It could be argued that this continuity making and continuity breaking balance is simply a function of genre or format
- Hence it has no special relationship to cult TV
- Cult TV unlike most realist soap operas or much contemporary serial and quality drama on TV does not only accrue a kind of series memory

Characters

- It also repeatedly represents particular close, though usually non-sexualised, character relationships
- Primary relationships between a male and female character which signal a mutual sexual attraction but never fully realised or cannot progress beyond romance
- Primary relationships between characters of the same sex
- Cult TV also depicts trusting relationships within a close-knit community

Time

- Lewis and Stempel (1993) one of their definitions of cult TV is that cult status can only be decided over time
- They are set apart from the mainstream by virtue of initial commercial failure
- And are adopted by audiences who perceive otherwise unseen value in them
- Hence this includes cult as anti-mainstream, cult as being adopted by distinctive, elevated and discerning fan audiences, cult as emerging over time, and cult as textually innovative or unusual

- However, this is not the case for everything that is cult television (e.g. *Buffy* didn't have initial commercial failure).

Tudor and Genre

- Andrew Tudor (1976) raised the question of how it is possible to textually analyse genre films without first implicitly identifying one's chosen films as belonging to the very genre under analysis
- If the qualities of a genre are assumed to emerge through close analysis of texts
- Then the question supposedly being explored has already been answered by the analyst in their choosing that text to analyse
- How can we analyse cult TV to discover textual similarities and shared forms without deciding in advance what counts as cult TV?
- So whilst the above definition may be useful in terms of exploring how cult texts share attributes, the other definitions are also important - depending on inter-texts and fans

Inter-Texts

- Fanzines – a term usually applied to non-professional, non-commercial fan-produced magazines or zines
- Fan readers are not only interested in how their favoured shows will develop narratively but also whether industry economics or institutional factors might disrupt or disallow such developments
- ***Cult Times*** - Offer no explicit logic for counting certain texts as cult TV
- This magazine is free to combine contemporary TV programmes with those from the 50s and 60s
- Suggesting their readers possess a sense of timeliness and on TV now as well as sense of cult TV as historically important
- *Cult Times* also includes TV listings pages, targeted at readers who want to know what cult TV is on terrestrial, cable and satellite TV each month in the UK

Fan audiences

- Being a fan of cult TV doesn't just mean displaying subjective enthusiasm or a special devotion
- It means, being able to attempt to account for and defend one's fan passions
- And attempting to ward off negative portrayals of fan cultures
- Fans self-consciously use the term cult and have organised themselves into appreciation societies
- A TV show may inspire a fan following over time and may gradually become a cult
- Fans of cult TV also gather for conventions where they share interests which creates a sense of communal fan distinctiveness
- Where conventions become annual events, held in fixed geographical locations fans produce commentaries, fan fiction, episode guides and production histories

Industry

- Attributing cult status purely to fan activity ignores the fact that even if fans initially created the term cult TV and a grouping of cult texts
- Any such term and textual grouping are open to later co-optation and tactical use by media producers
- As soon as fans become spectacularly visible through their organisation into Appreciation Societies, they become one possible target market among others
- Cults might therefore be constructed by media producers sensitive to what fans count as cult TV and how they read cult TV

Mainstream and the Internet

- And of course the Internet allows for cult television programmes to garner fandom and cult television status through online outlets.
- It also allows for a greater variety of fan activities.
- There are however, television programmes, such as *Doctor Who*, that are seen as mainstream and yet retain their cult status.
- Perhaps blurring some of the distinctions between the two.

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