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Cult Telefantasy Series

A Critical Analysis of *The Prisoner*, *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Lost*, *Heroes*, *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*

SUE SHORT

CRITICAL EXPLORATIONS IN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY, 30
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For Mr. K

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And special thanks to Julian, I hope this is worth the wait.

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Introduction

In an interview with *Alias* and *Lost* creator J.J. Abrams, journalist Steve Rose was prompted to reconsider his assumptions in describing his subject as a geek, affirming that "in an age when the most popular movies and TV series are based on comic books, sci-fi, fantasy and the supernatural, we are all basically geeks now" (Rose 2009). The popularity of recent fantasy-related television is a fundamental motivation behind this book, which asserts a need to revise former assumptions about the likely audience for such material, and questions what has led to this increased interest. Providing an assessment of diverse "telefantasy" series—shows with an SF, fantasy, or supernatural element—it argues that the genre warrants greater critical examination, having produced some of the most innovative series ever made. Although frequently derided as escapist or trivial, notable examples have won industry recognition and critical acclaim, praised for their high production values, complex narratives, and stylistic innovations. Equally significantly, broadcasters have started to recognize telefantasy's value, particularly in generating the kind of interest that is increasingly coveted by the industry. In order to better understand the genre, and how this newfound status has come about, the following assessment provides case studies of *Doctor Who* (1963–89, 2005–), *Star Trek* and its spin-offs (1966–9, 1987–1994, 1993–9, 1995–2001, 2001–5), *The Prisoner* (1966–7), *Twin Peaks* (1990–91), *The X-Files* (1993–2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2002), *Lost* (2004–10) and *Heroes* (2006–10). Their production histories are outlined and their aims and intentions noted, a summary is provided of key thematic concerns, and an assessment made of their respective legacies—both in terms of influences on one another and the array of shows they have inspired. In addition, by taking into account the industrial context in which each series emerged, key changes in broadcasting are discussed, including the rise of cable, the effects of deregulation, and the challenges wrought by the digital age. This book is consequently likely to interest anyone studying television or popular culture, as well as fans of fantastic television who would like to understand what such series have in common and what impact they have had within broadcasting.

Over the course of this analysis a number of ideas are challenged, including what constitutes "cult TV." Although the term is generally used to describe shows that elicit intense interest from viewers, it has also generated some discrepancies in its meaning. Reeves, Rogers and Epstein contend that "what distinguishes cult shows from typical fare is that a relatively large percentage of the viewers are avid fans" (1995, 27)—a group they differentiate from "casual viewers" and "devoted viewers" in terms of "enthusiastic viewer engagement," evidenced by activities such as archiving series, using favorite shows as a "major source of self-definition," and joining "interpretive communities" to discuss them (26). Today, with the archiving of series a simple matter of purchasing DVDs, and online discussion boards routinely set up by networks, we might ask whether this distinction still applies, or if the media industry now facilitates activities formerly initiated by fans. Attempting a further qualification, Matt Hills argues that a "cult" series is signaled not only by specific modes of engagement but by "its duration, especially in the absence of 'new' or official material" (Hills 2002, x). However, cult interest is not necessarily conferred in retrospect, but may surround series while they are still in production. Mythology shows—series that have an abundance of narrative detail built up over successive installments, and enigmas designed to foster regular viewing and invite close analysis—can be traced to early examples like *The Prisoner*, which elicited considerable audience engagement and scrutiny as it aired. Later series such as *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files* were similarly designed to yield intense interest during production, aiming to keep viewers guessing about narrative intrigues (and taking advantage of new media technologies such as the VCR and Internet in encouraging close attention). *Lost* employed a number of mysteries to prompt speculation as it broadcast, as well as planting "clues" in an array of media, and its remarkable success further illustrates why prior assumptions about cult television demand to be reconsidered. Where "cult" was once aligned with an exclusive and marginal interest (generally associated with obscure or rarified tastes, and an identity conferred by fans, rather than a marketing brand), this no longer appears to be the case. The broadcasting industry has proved adept at commodifying cult interest, with many telefantasy series "pre-packaged" as cults prior to transmission. As Sara Gwenllian Jones asserts, "The term 'cult television' has a variety of different meanings" and a diversity of potential audiences. For example, although cult appeal is generally denoted by shows that "accrue substantial active fan cultures"—additionally noting that "such series (though not always) belong to one or other of the fantastic series of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and the supernatural"—this does not necessarily imply that their audience is limited, as Jones points out that "fantastic genre cult television series are very often mainstream programs ... [which] appeal to both a mass general audience and to a dedicated fan base" (Jones 2003, 164–5).

The present work asks why "fantastic series" engender such interest, not-

ing key thematic and stylistic concerns, identifying the methods used to encourage audience engagement, and evaluating how the "crossover cult"—capable of securing mainstream appeal—has transformed telefantasy's fortunes. Where the genre was once relegated to modest budgets, poor timeslots, and a minimum of expectation, recent examples have benefitted from impressive budgets, primetime slots, and a variety of promotional endeavors to secure a mass audience, thanks largely to the surprising success of a fantasy island adventure that pulled in three times its anticipated audience. As Benji Wilson notes:

> When Damon Lindelof and J.J. Abrams sat down to sell *Lost* to America's ABC network ... they envisaged a series of 12 programmes aimed at the niche audience that had embraced Abrams's spy series *Alias*. Abrams and Lindelof found their niche anoraks—it was just that they numbered 25 million people [Wilson 2007].

By blending the fantastic with other generic features, and providing a set of mysteries that would get viewers hunting for clues and engaging in avid speculation, *Lost* combined quintessential cult features with mass appeal, securing unprecedented ratings and radically revising industry assumptions about the potential for "genre" shows. Not only did it inspire network investment in a number of big-budget telefantasy series, we have also seen various cult favorites return to our screens, including a revised series of *Doctor Who* (2005–), a cinematic "reboot" of *Star Trek* (2009), and even a miniseries makeover of *The Prisoner* (2009). The interest taken in shows that first aired over 40 years ago is not simply a matter of nostalgia, but an indication of how the cult telefantasy series has become big business, resulting in shows deliberately constructed to garner crossover appeal, with impressive production values and a number of narrative strategies used to attract high ratings. Viewers are actively pursued through a variety of media and fannish interests—such as paying close attention to texts, discussing plot developments, and archiving and re-viewing series—are no longer considered unusual or excessive, but have become relatively commonplace. However, contemporary developments have not proved unanimously successful. *Lost* may have earned three times its expected audience, but interest diminished as the concept was elaborated, most of the shows that followed have failed to outlast it, and the revisions made to long-standing cult series have all met with criticism from established fans—affirming that the changing fortunes for telefantasy are not necessarily to be championed. In fact, a key question asked in this analysis is whether the heightened status surrounding the genre has proven detrimental to its output, with increased commercial interests becoming more overt and a situation arising in which imitation threatens to efface innovation.

Although the depth of engagement and prolonged audience interest that typically distinguish a cult show are most commonly attached to telefantasy

series, this affinity has received little critical discussion—an omission this book aims to redress. The term "telefantasy" originated within fan circles, first appearing in magazines such as *Starburst* in the 1970s (Johnson 2005, 2) as a means of discussing series that involve fantastic elements (whether it be in terms of setting, superhuman abilities, or extraordinary events). Critical use of the term is less common, with the exception of Catherine Johnson's study of the same name, which argues that fantastic television constitutes a discernible genre, a claim this analysis both extends and corroborates in noting shared characteristics and concerns. Despite inherent problems in terms of breadth, particularly given the degree of generic slippage many shows are prone to, it is in identifying their fantastical features that the genre's appeal can be better understood, alongside a propensity at reinvention which has proved crucial to its survival. The series discussed range from 1963 to 2010, mostly concentrating on key developments over the last two decades. A chronological order is followed, with the exception of *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*, which are assessed in the final chapter to appraise contemporary revisions made in the light of preceding trends. Instead, *The Prisoner* serves as the starting point for analysis, as this maverick series is deemed to have pioneered a number of cult characteristics, evaluating how the innovations of later series emerged via a similar mix of creative endeavor and practical necessity, and highlighting significant industrial developments along the way. A select history of cult telefantasy series is thus provided, revealing how the genre has adapted itself to changing conditions—flourishing when increased competition lead to the pursuit of niche markets, proving able to attract a desired demographic, and acquiring renewed network interest when deregulation resulted in greater media conglomeration and a quest to find shows that could make the most of available assets. Understanding is thus yielded of the factors that have propelled telefantasy's development—including new legislation, new networks and new technologies—all of which would reshape the genre and extend its appeal.

Relatively new territory is explored here. Academic assessments of telefantasy shows tend to fall into three categories: 1) those that confine themselves to a single text (such as the publications edited by Lavery et al. on *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, *Lost* and *Heroes*, as well as the growing number of scholarly collections on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Battlestar Galactica*); 2) those that situate series within a wider discussion of cult and quality (see Jancovich and Lyons 2003, Bignell and Lacey 2005, Hammond and Mazdon 2005, and McCabe and Akass 2007); or 3) those that focus on surrounding fan cultures (see Jenkins 1992, and Hills 2002). The problem with the first tendency is that it provides limited opportunity to discern shared features between series, which is pivotal to this analysis. Evaluating specific examples as "quality TV" is a notable critical tendency in recent academic work, highlighting respective innovations; yet such an approach tends to obscure their generic identity. While many telefantasy shows share archetypal "quality" characteristics—particularly