

Representation: Exploring Issues of Sex, Gender and Race in Cult

Television

Lorna Jowett

How realistic is it to expect cult television, something many consider a niche market, to impact on perceptions of sex, gender or race? Yet television fiction, striving to remain relevant and credible to audiences, must negotiate questions of identity that change as understanding of ourselves and our society changes. In turn, television's popular nature makes these negotiations influential. Television drama deals with sex, gender, and race because it tends to centre on character. Often, representations are mobilised in a liberal humanist fashion which embraces diversity and freedom of expression but does not acknowledge the political significance of identity. Despite successive waves of feminism and gay rights activism, sex and gender tend to be depoliticised because they may be dealt with as individual concerns, playing down their social significance. Race, perhaps especially in the US, is seen to be more political. Naturally, the mainstream, commercial nature of television means that sensitive subjects will always be handled carefully, often leading to a "least offensive programming" strategy (though what is considered offensive will vary from country to country and from individual to individual). Yet the increasing segmentation of television markets has caused a shift to what some describe as "narrowcasting," and in an industry that now values products aimed at specific audiences, cult television has come into its own. Cult, through its negotiation of genre, potentially enables representations to be less mainstream. Furthermore, given the overlap between

cult and some “quality” television, its audience may be more willing to embrace challenging representation as part of contemporary television drama.

The genre categories frequently labelled cult (science fiction, horror, action) are historically associated with young, white, male viewers. Why would shows that apparently target such an audience have anything to say about sex, gender, or race? Firstly, whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality are no longer the invisible “norms” of society and representation of them can be equally revealing about the ways we construct identity. Secondly, Sarah Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson argue that despite the notion that cult has a limited market, “unlike many low-budget films aimed at niche audiences of aficionados, cult television is fairly mainstream fare,”¹ so it is hardly surprising if it reaches a wider audience than its perceived target. Some shows classed as cult have always had large numbers of viewers, *Doctor Who* (1963-89, 2005-? BBC/BBC1) being one obvious instance. *Doctor Who* is a “quality” production from the BBC and its scheduling in the UK during early evening primetime (around 7pm on a Saturday) indicates its intended status as mainstream family television, as well as science fiction cult fare. A crossover with teen television can also “mainstream” cult products (such as *Smallville* 2001-2006 WB, 2006-? CW or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 1997-2001 WB, 2001-2003 UPN), as well as positioning them to debate sexuality and gender as teen concerns.

In addition, cult television’s genre leanings may offer latitude for innovative representations of gender, sex, and race. The fantastic elements of many cult shows lend

¹ Sarah Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson, *Cult Television* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. xii.

themselves to defamiliarising the customs, interactions, and morals that structure social identity. This does not mean that all fantastic television makes use of this potential, of course. Nor does it mean that all cult television is fantastic. “Genre” has less authority in the blended landscape of contemporary television, yet its conventions still affect representation. The term “fantasy violence” in ratings (for television, film, and games) demonstrates how audiences and regulators see the fantastic as a mode that does not work in the same way or require the same rules as “realistic” fiction. The allegorical or symbolic nature of the fantastic enables cult shows to debate sex, gender, or race under cover of stories about aliens, robots, demons, other worlds, or other times. *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966-69 NBC) is a well-known example, being credited with the first interracial kiss on US network television (in “Plato’s Stepchildren,” though the kiss, between Captain Kirk and Lieutenant Uhura, was “excused” by the plot as being compelled through alien telekinesis). Creator Gene Roddenberry relates, “I could make statements about sex, religion, Vietnam, unions, politics and intercontinental missiles. . . .we were sending messages, and fortunately they all got by the network.”²

Perhaps this is one reason why cult television has been criticised for its poor representation of race. While other, more mainstream, genres such as police drama have a history of including characters from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds (*Hill Street Blues* 1981-87 NBC, *NYPD Blue* 1993-2005 ABC); “cult” genres have not done the same. But what constitutes positive representation? It is not simply a question of counting up white and non-white characters: the starship *Enterprise* of *Star Trek: The Original*

² Quoted in Jan Johnson-Smith, *American Science Fiction TV* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p. 59.

Series has a multi-cultural bridge crew but a white male is still in charge and the (mainstream, white) ideology of the Federation is valorised over Other cultures. Representation of race in cult television is not always recognisably about existing racial issues; it often concerns attitudes to race (species) and our (human) relations with Others. Immigration, naturalisation, and the tensions within diverse populations can be mediated through the trope of the alien/ Other in a safely defamiliarised story. While *Star Trek's* utopian Federation (at least in most of the franchise's incarnations), is supposedly above prejudice of any kind, other cult shows like *Babylon 5* (1994-97 PTEN, 1997-98 TNT) or *Farscape* (1999-2003 Sci Fi) overtly engage with interspecies conflict motivated by race and nationalism. *Babylon 5* is a multi-species critical utopia (a utopia in progress, striving for a better world, rather than having achieved it) set not long after the Earth-Minbari War, with a complex history of other conflicts both between and within its various species, such as the Centauri occupation of Narn, the Shadow War, the past oppression of telepaths and current power of the Psi Corps. *Farscape's* Peacekeepers value racial purity and the basic premise of the show is that Crichton must adjust to living in a multi-species population as the only human (though Sebaceans/ Peacekeepers are noticeably similar, aligning their tendency to racial oppression with the human).

Fantastic settings can invite comparison with the viewer's own world. Recent *Doctor Who* episodes feature passing comment on companion Martha's blackness during a visit to New York city in the Depression era ("Daleks in Manhattan" and "Evolution of the Daleks") and rural Britain immediately before World War I ("Human Nature" and "Family of Blood"). Notably her gender is a matter for less comment in these adventures. Having characters note racial identity highlights how our society has moved on from the

prejudice of the past (a strategy also employed by *Star Trek*). In the 1920s or 30s, Martha's identity as female might be equally remarkable to the inhabitants of societies accustomed to male dominance and particular perceptions of gender, as well as race. Yet the Doctor has had female companions since the show's debut in the 1960s, and they are often as active as male counterparts. In the context of viewing the show, then, gender seems less noteworthy than race. Through characters like Martha, and previously Mickey, the updated version of the show now works to incorporate blackness as an everyday aspect of British identity, noted only by less enlightened characters.

In contemporary cult television, point of view can be shifted to give various sides of the story. However, if the main characters are almost all white (as well as middle class and heterosexual) then the boundaries of normality are still reinforced, despite narratives interrogating hegemonic values. Similarly, if Otherness is almost always projected onto aliens or vampires and negotiated in allegorical ways, it is at risk of remaining (or being read by the audience as) "just a story about vampires [or aliens]," without any social relevance. Rodenberry's comment about getting past the network censors highlights the importance of interpretation for any given scenario, and audiences may choose to ignore apparently progressive messages, rendering their viewing safe escapist entertainment.

No single facet of identity can easily be separated from the whole, and representation of race links with sex via reproduction and discourses of racial purity or hybridity in cult television characters such as Spock (*Star Trek*), DeLenn (*Babylon 5*), alien/ human hybrids in *The X-Files* (1993-2002 Fox), human-model Cylons (organic androids) in *Battlestar Galactica* (2003/4-? Sky 1/ Sci Fi), or human/ demon characters in *Buffy* and *Angel* (1999-2004 WB). These characters often experience culture clash or dual

consciousness and have sometimes been read as “tragic mulatto” figures (in American literature, a term denoting a mixed-race character who, because of racial divides, is caught between two cultures while fitting into neither). Interspecies liaisons (like that of Chiana and D’Argo in *Farscape*) can also stand in for interracial relationships. Their presence raises questions about what constitutes humanity in a wider frame than our current society.

While the fantastic offers specific strategies for exploring race, the handling of romance remains heavily influenced by the codes and conventions of television drama, and this inevitably affects representation of sex and gender. Emphasis on serial narrative or the ensemble cast prioritises character development, and means cult shows can demonstrate emotional realism, despite their fantastic elements. Early cult television like the original *Star Trek* focused on characters and their relationships as a strategy to attract the female viewers considered desirable by advertisers³ – one deliberate attempt to widen the target audience. The high-profile but short-lived *Twin Peaks* (1990-91 ABC) uses style and narrative quirkiness to distinguish itself *as* cult, yet this is adapted in longer-running successors like *The X-Files* which combines *Twin Peaks*’ darkness and idiosyncrasy with strong lead characters and ongoing speculation about their relationship. (*The X-Files* aired for nine seasons in comparison with *Twin Peaks* two).

The boundaries of acceptable topics related to sex on television may have relaxed in recent decades but some conventions still hold considerable sway. While representation of homosexuality has generally moved from invisibility to visibility, for instance, a heteronormative perspective tends to dominate. Television drama, including

³ See Catherine Johnson, *Telefantasy* (London: BFI, 2005), p. 77.

cult, often explores heteronormativity in terms of morality, gender roles, violence, romance, monogamy, and appropriate coupling, and in doing so can undermine its privileged status. The nature of serial television also contributes here: romance may be appealing but unresolved sexual tension satisfies the demands of serial narrative better (as in *The X-Files*) and many cult teen shows featuring independent female protagonists problematise traditional romance. The rules of appropriate coupling still generally apply to cult television, yet, when a character is a superhero, a warrior princess, a vampire, or a secret agent, the struggle to find an “appropriate” partner and maintain a relationship is fraught with difficulty. *Dark Angel* (2000-2002 Fox) took this to parodic extremes in its second season when protagonists Max and Logan were unable to share physical contact because an engineered virus put Logan at risk if Max even touched him.

Sex may be easier to find than romance, and certain genres in cult lend themselves to negotiating sexuality in less “vanilla” terms: the gothic elements of *Buffy* and *Angel* allowed a range of BDSM sexual practices to appear on screen, for example. Generally, however, especially in shows featuring younger characters, the boundaries of “appropriate” sexual behaviour are tested but adhered to: bad partners and bad sex may be entertained by the narrative (and serve to entertain the audience) but are eventually rejected or condemned. Some shows have attempted to challenge standard morality by introducing characters who accept and enjoy, or overtly profit from their sexuality (Inara in *Firefly* [2002-2003 Fox] is a professional Companion, with status roughly equating to a Geisha, Chiana from *Farscape* is exiled from her own strictly regulated society because she chooses freedom in all things, including sexual behaviour). Yet even fans admit that

such representations have difficulty rising above stereotype (Chiana's character development is often critiqued along these lines).

Sexual innuendo might slip past the regulators, but open displays of homosexuality on screen attract criticism as well as praise. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine's* (1993-99 syndication) same-sex kiss between joined Trills Jadzia Dax and Lenara Khan in "Rejoined" (4.5) is one example, though as with the original series' interracial kiss, this was carefully "justified" by the plot. (Joined Trill host long-lived symbionts. Jadzia, a regular character, hosts Dax. In this episode she meets Lenara, whose symbiont, Khan, was married to Torias, a male host of Dax, while joined with another body. Despite taboos against such relationships, based on the history of their symbionts Jadzia and Lenara are strongly attracted to each other, and share one kiss before agreeing to part. The "lesbian" kiss is therefore displaced onto a historically "heterosexual" relationship). On the other hand, viewers may develop subtextual or resistant readings that actively queer characters or relationships, as an abundance of slash fan fiction testifies. More self-conscious shows encourage such readings, witness *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon's often-quoted Bring Your Own Subtext invitation.⁴ Glyn Davis states that in *Smallville* "the friendship between Clark and Lex is . . . fairly evidently homoeroticised" and suggests that such representations "complement the overt representation of queer teens in the teen series."⁵ Regular viewers of *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001 syndication) may have

⁴ Quoted in Esther Saxey, "Staking a Claim: The Series and Its Fan Fiction," in Roz Kaveney (ed.) *Reading the Vampire Slayer* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), p. 208.

⁵ Glyn Davis, "'Saying it Out Loud': Revealing Television's Queer Teens," in Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (eds.) *Teen TV* (London: BFI, 2004), p. 137.

ridiculed the notion that Xena and Gabrielle's lesbian relationship was subtextual; by the end of the show's six season run, it had become canonical to many.

Such readings are not, of course, restricted to cult television, though fan activity perhaps makes them more apparent. Television as a medium seems to lend itself to queering or otherwise disrupting the supposed "male gaze" of cinema. The male in cult shows, as in current mainstream television, is just as likely to be displayed openly as an object for the gaze as the female, whether this is via Clark Kent's too-tight shirts in *Smallville* or Angel's torture scenes in *Buffy*. Science fiction, gothic horror, and superhero narratives also tend to particular dress codes, frequently involving leather or Lycra and sometimes verging on fetish wear (like Scorpius' bodysuit in *Farscape*). Despite understandable reluctance to step too far outside of the usual conventions for representing sex, the overt spectacle of semi-clothed bodies, the outfits worn by attractive stars, the focus on relationship arcs, and the prevalence of self-consciousness or even camp, mean that via a medium perceived to be mainstream because of its domesticity, cult television brings all kinds of potentially queer or resistant images directly into the home.

Representations of sex inevitably connect with representations of gender. Notions of appropriate coupling and "good" sex affect representations of both femininity and masculinity. Biological essentialism is sometimes upheld by these fictions, but is also challenged, not least by hybridisation of what were once identified as masculine or feminine genres, combining action and professional life with relationships and domesticity. The primacy of the white male hero has been questioned or, at the very least, recent cult shows focused on white male heroes tend to problematise these aspects of

identity (as in *Angel*, see case study, below). Likewise, the postfeminist terrain of apparent freedom and equality for women has also been mapped, if mostly via white middle class protagonists. Role reversal is common, with a range of female action heroes and sensitive, nurturing males in evidence. One of the forerunners here is the pairing in *The X-Files*, which presents the female Scully as logical, rational, and scientific and the male Mulder as impulsive, intuitive, and open to “irrational” explanations. While the value of direct role reversal is questionable, such representation helps develop contemporary cult characters who no longer match up neatly to traditional gender roles or gendered characteristics. Even within the parameters of genre conventions, such characters maintain gender fluidity; indeed the vogue for generic hybridity may even encourage this.

In some senses, then, the representations of sex, gender, and race found in cult television are no different to those in other types of television. However, the genre elements of cult allow greater scope for addressing these issues in speculative ways unconstrained by conventions of realism. Critically acclaimed cult television shows (such as recently, the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* or *Heroes* 2006-? NBC), perhaps understandably, are often those that strive for aspects of realism in representation. Because these tend currently to revolve around characters and relationships, the focus is on identity constructed as an individual and is often directed to a mainstream audience (hence, perhaps, the primacy of sex or gender rather than race). The political nature of identity is rarely raised, or only in a disguised fashion, leaving the viewer to either applaud their own liberal reading of a particular story-arc or character, or to dismiss these as fantasy with no real foundation.

Yet the postmodern cult television text, which tends to be contradictory and unstable in all kinds of ways, is arguably an ideal vehicle for allowing viewers to recognise their own contradictory and unstable sense of who they are, whether this relates to sex, gender, or race. The blurring of boundaries in contemporary cult drama might work against a clear political context, but it also tends to deny traditional linear narrative and work against a neat resolution. In this sense, the problem of identity is never solved, it remains fluid and contingent.

Suggested Further Reading

Battis, Jes. *Investigating Farscape*. I.B. Tauris, 2007.

Bernardi, Daniel Leonard. *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Jowett, Lorna. *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005.

Case Study: *Angel* (1999-2004 WB)

Angel's title character became a soulless vampire in 1753. Known as Angelus, he wreaked havoc for decades, until killing a gypsy girl led to a curse that returned his soul, and with it, guilt for his evil deeds. It also stipulated that if he ever experienced perfect happiness, his soul would be removed again. Angel, as he now calls himself, seeks redemption by fighting evil. His soul is temporarily lost when he feels true happiness during sex with Buffy (in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) but is returned by magical means. This ends any hope that he and Buffy can have a normal relationship, however, and he moves to LA. Now the focus of a new spin-off show, Angel sets up an agency dedicated to "helping the helpless," assisted by assorted regular characters.

This backstory alone demonstrates how cult television deals in complex stories about character, and therefore with issues of identity. *Angel*'s fantasy vampires and demons can "stand in for social issues," as Brian Wall and Michael Zryd point out.⁶ Thus as well as figuring Otherness via gender or sexuality, demons in *Angel* are sometimes deliberately constructed as ethnic groups, or slavery is displaced onto demon-human relations. Other episodes highlight racism and prejudice. "You wouldn't get it. You're passing. . . . You can walk down the street," says one demon to another whose demon features are not always visible ("Hero" 1.9), like vampires, who invariably "pass" in *Buffy* and *Angel*.

Yet *Angel* also negotiates race via its characters, like the dead white European Angel, or the street-smart black Gunn. While it may be difficult for white writers to

⁶ Wall and Zryd, "Vampire Dialectics," in Roz Kaveney (ed.) *Reading the Vampire Slayer* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), p. 66.

render Gunn consistently convincing, the character does allow for a more “realistic” commentary on race; that is, one situated in our world, rather than in fantasy. Gunn’s overall arc can be read as assimilation, but the recognition that he must lose touch with his old neighbourhood when he starts work with Angel Investigations acknowledges that his world remains separate from that of white professionals. Gunn also challenges traditional constructions of the hero as white, though both Angel and Wesley’s whiteness is complicated by their identification as European.

While the show does have fascinating regular female characters, *Angel* deals predominantly with masculinity: producer David Greenwalt says, “*Buffy* is about how hard it is to be a woman, and *Angel* is about how hard it is to be a man”⁷. Regular characters such as Angel, Doyle, Wesley, Gunn, Lorne, Connor, Lindsey, and Spike offer a range of masculinities that develop in concert. *Angel* explores and develops male relationships via its mixture of action/ horror/ superhero/ noir, from colleagues (Wesley, Gunn, Angel, Lorne) to friendship (Wesley and Gunn, Angel and Doyle), to rivalry (Angel and Lindsey, Angel and Spike), to father-son conflict (Liam/ Angelus and his father, Wesley and his father, Angel and his son Connor). Wesley’s gradual transformation from effete bumbling fool to competent demon fighter takes in comedy, action, and melodrama,⁸ while Connor, as well as being Angel’s troubled son, functions as a contrasting version of the vigilante superhero (just as the Groosalug offers another

⁷ Quoted in Joe Nazzaro, *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy Television* (London: Titan Books, 2002), p. 158

⁸ See Stacey Abbott on Wesley in Abbott (ed.) *Reading Angel*, (London: I B Tauris, 2005), 189-202.

take on the noble hero). Moreover, while Wesley, Gunn, and Lindsey struggle with human constructions of manhood, Angel, Spike, and Lorne face further challenges in constructing a version of masculinity that incorporates their Otherness as demons – as Cordelia says of Angel, they are literally “not like other men” (“Carpe Noctem” 3.4).

Similarly, the show explores a range of sexualities from conventional workplace romance (Gunn and Fred, Wes and Fred, Angel and Cordelia) to more antagonistic and kinky relationships (Angel/us and Darla, Wesley and Lilah). Given concerns about taste and acceptability, much of the “bad” sex is displaced onto “bad” characters, as with Angel/us’s history. Even here the level of emotional realism can be high, demonstrating that relationships have similar problems for vampires or regular people. Yet the fantastic mode exaggerates situations, and heterosexual romance is dealt with via Angel’s hyperbolic relationships with Buffy, Darla, and Cordelia, offering another twist on the impossibility of romantic/ sexual fulfilment since the protagonist seems forbidden consummation of his love. Even this is redeemed in the final season: Angel finally realizes that most relationships will never offer perfect happiness, so he may as well enjoy the chances he has.

Angel is overtly sexualised because of the attention paid to his body, a now commonplace focus in other television shows, offering the male as spectacle and attraction for the viewer. Here it also derives from horror and action, which have always focused on the body and its vulnerability. In Angel, this fascination with the physical and the un/controlled body is carried through to sexuality because of the curse. In addition, the show uses vampirism as Otherness to question Angel’s heterosexuality. Through all five seasons runs a stream of assumptions from minor characters that Angel is gay. His

interactions with camp demon entertainer Lorne highlight this, and overt homoerotic elements underpin his sparring with both Lindsey and Spike. Angel spends three seasons of *Buffy* and most of *Angel* pining after unattainable blonde women, but the inclusion of vampire Spike in season five shows that his attraction to blondes may extend beyond heterosexuality, and their interactions veer between buddy-movie and “perfect couple.”⁹

While other “quality” television dramas address changing masculine roles, few do so extensively within a genre context that draws on action and heroism, and that directs attention emphatically to the body. Like other cult television, therefore, *Angel* continually uses genre and the fantastic as a means to expand the possibilities for representing sex, gender and race.

⁹ As Joss Whedon describes them (“The Final Season” DVD featurette, *Angel: The Complete DVD Collection* Twentieth Century Fox, 2005.).