

A black and white portrait of Catriona Miller, a woman with long, dark, wavy hair. She is looking slightly to the left with a subtle smile. Her right hand is raised, with fingers spread, near her face. She is wearing a dark, high-necked top. The background is plain white.

Catriona Miller

Cult TV Heroines

Angels, Aliens
& Amazons

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Angels, Aliens and Amazons

Catriona Miller

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Prelude: The Thirteenth Doctor

In October 2018, to a UK audience of 8.2 million, a new Cult TV heroine crashed through the roof of a train in Sheffield. With a ‘bit of adrenaline, dash of outrage and a hint of panic ...’ (Episode 11.1)¹ the new Doctor had arrived.

Doctor Who is one of the longest-running Cult TV shows and follows the adventures of the maverick Doctor, an alien Time Lord who travels through time and space righting wrongs, fighting tyranny, saving humanity from alien invaders accompanied by an ever-changing group of mostly human ‘companions’. However, the true genius of the format lies in the ability of the Doctor to regenerate, thus opening the door to the role being played by a series of actors and offering the audience fresh faces, new quirks of character and a clean(ish) narrative slate. It is not just the Doctor who regenerates, but the whole show.

Doctor Who was created by the BBC in 1963 and was originally intended to be a children’s history programme. However, it morphed into a family-oriented drama and became something that can reasonably be called ‘the most influential fantasy series in television history’ (Chapman, 2002, p. 2), developing over the years into an increasingly jumbled tangle of narratives and characters. *Star Trek* is the other foundational show that can lay claim to ‘cult’ status, but while the original *Star Trek* folded after only three series, *Doctor Who* remained in production for twenty-six years (Chapman, 2013, p. 2), although by the late 1980s it was fading in popularity and rapidly heading towards a parody of itself and in 1989 the BBC pulled the plug. There was an attempted revival in 1996 aimed at the American market, but as its American reception was described as ‘lukewarm at best’ (Chapman, 2013, p. 182), it remained in limbo until 2005 when it was rebooted once more, with a new Doctor and a refreshed format, to critical acclaim and renewed audiences around the world.

The 2005 reboot, overseen by writer/executive producer Russell T Davies, created faster, noisier and bigger stories than ever before which carefully

managed to combine the affection and nostalgia of those who had grown up with the Doctor, with younger audiences' expectations in terms of speed, budget and quality. No doubt the successful combination of the new and the old was in part due to the number of self-confessed fans amongst the writers, directors and stars of the show (e.g. Davies himself, Mark Gatiss, Steven Moffat, Chris Chibnall, David Tennant and Peter Capaldi). The show was an immediate hit with audiences at home and internationally, introducing the ninth regeneration of the Doctor in the form of 'northern', leather jacket wearing Christopher Eccleston. Then in succession came a skinny, hyperactive tenth Doctor played by David Tennant; a much younger, Fez wearing eleventh Doctor, played by Matt Smith; and the guitar playing, dark glasses wearing twelfth Doctor, Peter Capaldi. All, of course, are variations of white British men.

There was, however, something different about the Thirteenth Doctor, played by Jodie Whittaker. She was a woman. The casting decision caused far more debate amongst fans of the show than the youth of Smith, or the age of Capaldi. As *Variety* reported, 'to some, this female Doctor is way overdue; to others, it represented a concession to wokeness² [*sic*] by denigrating a classic character' (Framke, 2018), but the new showrunner Chris Chibnall had already signalled that there would be changes even as his vision for the series was taking root. It was, he said, to be 'incredibly emotional', with 'stories that resonate with the world we're living in now, and I wanted it to be the most accessible, inclusive, diverse season of *Doctor Who* that the show has ever done' (Itzkoff, 2018). However, in her first interview after the announcement Whittaker tried to put the fans' minds at rest, saying, 'I want to tell the fans not to be scared by my gender. Because this is a really exciting time, and *Doctor Who* represents everything that's exciting about change. The fans have lived through so many changes, and this is only a new, different one, not a fearful one' (BBC, 2017) – a sentiment that was echoed several times in the first episode of Series 11, *The Woman Who Fell to Earth*, for example in the Doctor's plea to new companion Graham (Bradley Walsh): 'Don't be scared', she says. 'All of this is new to you and new can be scary. Now we all want answers. Stick with me and you might get some', she finishes firmly, surely an address to the audience as much as to the character.

Many fans were certainly pleased to have a female Doctor, but some were not so sure and some were downright hostile. They were not long in making their feelings clear via social media, where #notmydoctor began circulating on Twitter and Instagram. As one Twitter user put it, '#DoctorWho died today. He didn't die nobly as you might expect. He was murdered by Political Correctness' (Huckabee, 2017), while on Facebook one post stated, 'A woman's place is

anywhere but piloting the TARDIS' ('Doctor Who Should be Male', 2019). In fact, due to a number (though unspecified) of direct complaints made to the BBC, unusually, they released a statement on the issue.

Since the first Doctor regenerated back in 1966, the concept of the Doctor as a constantly evolving being has been central to the programme. The continual input of fresh ideas and new voices across the cast and the writing and production teams has been key to the longevity of the series. The Doctor is an alien from the planet Gallifrey and it has been established in the show that Time Lords can switch gender ... We hope viewers will enjoy what we have in store for the continuation of the story (BBC, 2018a).

When the premiere eventually came in October, it proved a success and was, in fact, the highest series opener since the show's return in 2005 (Goldbart, 2018), and although viewer numbers dropped by the end of the series, it was still regularly featuring in the top ten of UK programmes, and it delivered US audiences too. The critics were mostly convinced, with *The Guardian* newspaper describing Whittaker's performance as 'effervescent' (Martin, 2018) and *The Hollywood Reporter* opting for 'fizzily captivating' as well as 'loose and lively, cheeky and irreverent' (Bahr, 2018). Some fans remained unhappy, however, with some feeling she was 'too passive' ('This is not my Doctor', 2018) and others that she was 'a kinder, gentler, touchy-feely, kid-friendly Doctor. She is full of self-doubt, is indecisive and wants a hug' (Belam & Martin, 2018). All of which is perhaps just code for 'the Doctor is a woman'.

Always an important moment for establishing the character of any new Doctor, Whittaker's costume consequently had a lot of extra work to do. As had been the case with previous incarnations, the costume was revealed in advance, in this case a full year before the series aired. It featured a long pale blue hooded coat, trimmed with rainbows, cropped trousers with sensible boots, a dark T-shirt also with a rainbow stripe across the chest and yellow braces. Jodie Whittaker and the costume designer Ray Holman developed the look together. Whittaker said, 'I found an old black-and-white image on Google that spoke to me. It's of a woman walking with purpose in crop trousers, boots, braces and a T-shirt, and she just looks so comfortable and non-gender specific – that was my style point' (*Radio Times*, 2018). Although gender neutrality was the aim, the designer Holman did make the point that 'Jodie's Doctor's costume has around 6 pockets but I may have forgotten one. Pockets are important not only for this character but for women in clothes in general because for so long in history women didn't have pockets and even today some women's trousers suits are still made without them' (BBC, 2018b).

This 'non gender specific' approach was in marked contrast to the earlier representation of the Master, the Doctor's great enemy, also a regenerating Time Lord. In Series 8, the Master is revealed to be Missy (Michelle Gomez). Of course, if the character had been called the Mistress (as a feminized version of the Master) this would rather have given the game away to alert audiences, but Missy means 'a young girl' and is often used in a disparaging way, as opposed to the more mature 'mistress', which usually means a woman in a position of authority. In her regeneration and renaming, the female Master seemed to have some of her power removed. Missy also embraced a hyper-feminine appearance, wearing period Victoriana, complete with corset and bustle. As the central character, the hero, the new Doctor apparently could not afford to do the same. (See Figure 1 where the Doctor is not afraid to get stuck into some 'hands-on' engineering under the TARDIS.)

The Doctor's costume, despite everything, managed the show's usual neat trick of introducing a fresh look whilst winking towards previous incarnations. An analysis of the pre-2005 version of the show noted that in spite of 'the superficial differences between them, there was a much greater underlying continuity in the costumes worn by the [at that point] eight successive lead players than is generally acknowledged' (Britton & Barker, 2003, p. 146). They pointed out that the Doctor's clothes always seem to owe something to the *fin de siècle* (Victorian/Edwardian era) and to 'professional authority or the upper class' (Britton & Barker, 2003, p. 147). However, there was always something 'not quite right', out of context or exaggerated in its execution. The Fourth Doctor (Tom Baker) wore



Figure 1 The first female Doctor Who (Jodie Whittaker) is not afraid to get stuck into some 'hands-on' engineering work. *Doctor Who, Spyfall* (12.1).

a scarf that was too long; the Fifth Doctor (Peter Davison) wore a strange version of cricketing whites; the Eleventh Doctor, the youngest, wore a tweed jacket and bow tie reminiscent of an early-twentieth-century professor, but also often wore a Fez – a type of flat-topped red hat made popular in the turn-of-the-century Ottoman Empire. The Doctor does not get it right because of course the Doctor is an alien.

Whittaker's outfit is one of the most contemporary, no tweed or velvet on display, or leather patches on the elbow, but the silhouette of the long coat (reminiscent of the frock coat), trousers and boots was familiar and easily, with the possible exception of the Twelfth Doctor's black suit, white shirt and Dr Martens boots, the least eccentric of the Doctor's outfits. The eccentricity, the 'getting it wrong', rather lay in a woman wearing sensible boots instead of high heels, practical trousers instead of a skirt, and a coat with pockets instead of a handbag. In this context, the Thirteenth Doctor's costume is less eccentric and instead quietly radical.

The refresh, however, as Chibnall had intimated, extended to more than just the costume. The storylines of Series 11 were more contained than had been the case in prior series, with a greater focus on self-contained individual episodes and a return to the 'history lessons' of the original concept, with episodes such as *Rosa* (11.3) exploring Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott in 1950s Alabama, or *Nikola Tesla's Night of Terror* (12.4) introducing the maverick engineer with a fascination for electricity. *The Witchfinders* (11.8) also referenced a historical moment, set around the Pendle witch trial in Lancashire, one of the most famous in English history.

The Doctor too seemed to have left behind the edgier, alien, moments of previous Doctors. She seemed to have cheered up, with a revitalized zeal, as she herself announced to 'sort out fair play throughout the universe' (11.1). The famous sonic screwdriver, a tool for every occasion that the Doctor always carried, was shown being built by the Doctor herself. This Doctor was not the pitiless punisher of *The Family of Blood* (3.9) where the Tenth Doctor ensured eternal prisons for each of the aliens; or being responsible for the death of a companion, like the Twelfth Doctor who lost two companions Clara Oswald (Jenna Coleman) and Bill Potts (Pearl Mackie). However *Fugitive of the Judoon* (12.5) introduced a forgotten incarnation of the Doctor (Jo Martin) with a violent streak and an audacious retcon in *The Timeless Children* (12.10) brought the Doctor's origins into question and opened up a narrative thread about her true identity both of which were followed up in Series 13.

The furore surrounding the Thirteenth Doctor prompts a question: why does this matter? The age and provenance of this most quintessential of Cult TV shows seem to make a female Doctor Who a very big deal, but why does it matter what sex an alien, fantasy, imaginary character appears to be? But *Doctor Who* illustrates well the tension that runs through most of this book between 'what is' and 'what may be' which lies at the heart of fantasy. Stories certainly help to shape expectations and illustrate social realities, but they also provide a playground for ideas and imaginative possibilities. Despite two hundred years (give or take) of feminism, there is still work to be done in imagining all that women might be capable of. As stories begin to be told and retold, with innovations and unexpected twists and turns, the full range of possibilities for women become more thinkable and conceivable. These 'fantastic' tales may be constrained by production context and ideological norms, but they also have the power to spark imaginations and suggest new directions. The Thirteenth Doctor *is* a big deal.

In this book, I will textually analyse some of the stories that have been told in the fantasy genres of the imagination where we might expect to see the most radical visions of what women might be and achieve, but I will also examine, more often than I would like, where they fall short and where gender norms still constrain the heroines. But, whatever else Cult TV might be, the attachment of audiences to the texts suggests that they are telling stories audiences are hungry to hear over and over again.

The sheer volume of material generated by television is one of the biggest challenges in studying any aspect of television. The number of hours involved and the length of the narrative in any drama series are off the scale in comparison to studying film, thus arriving at a representative but manageable number of shows for this book has been challenging. The programmes that have been selected are a cross section, rather than an exhaustive list, but I am well aware of the debates that rage amongst fans and academia regarding what is and what is not Cult TV: even the most casual conversation with family and friends revealed that everyone has an opinion!

Therefore, the aim for each chapter has been to take two or three programmes as the focus of discussion, with at least one from the 'back catalogue', alongside more contemporary offerings, which does sometimes throw up surprising results where the older shows seem able to imagine freer heroines than the contemporary ones.

However, the book is not just about Cult TV but also about *heroines*, and in order to facilitate that discussion one of the conditions I set in choosing programmes was that the heroine must be at the centre of the show. I have

looked for protagonists with agency, where the narrative thrust of the show centres their journey. Thus, I have left out many secondary female characters in dramas where a male is obviously the central concern of the story. For example, *Farscape* (1999–2003, Jim Henson Productions) has many interesting female characters: the tough Aeyrn (Claudia Black), the philosophical plant priestess Zhaan (Virginia Hey), the teenage delinquent Chiana (Gigi Edgley) and others, but there can be no doubt that the narrative revolves around Crichton (Ben Browder), the human astronaut who is trying to find his way home. The exception to this rule is Chapter 2 which focuses on male/female partnerships, included here as the original entry point for heroines in Cult TV before they became standalone protagonists in their own right.

Chapter 1 covers the essential but complex question: what is Cult TV? Cult TV is perhaps best described as a composite creation of sometimes competing cultural forces where the texts hold some of these forces in tension, which goes some way to accounting for their sometimes messy, rambling and disjointed narrative worlds. The composite is broken down into three sections. Firstly, the external environment, considering external production and distribution settings in the world of television broadcasting, which both creates and sustains the shows in question, and sometimes destroys them too. The second element in the composite is the text itself. This section explores the knotty question of genre, particularly around fantasy, takes an overview of academic approaches to the phenomenon, before tackling the third element the internal environment, suggesting *why* Cult TV exists at all, through the introduction of concepts of active imagination and the transcendent function drawn from Jungian psychology. The chapter concludes by circling back round the question of the external environment, albeit this time from an ideological point of view, encompassing feminism, gender and autonomy.

Subsequent chapters focus on the Cult TV texts themselves. The approach has been to consider a blend of narrative and audiovisual textual analysis. First of all, the 'type' of character is introduced with some history and context before moving on to a closer look at each show in turn, keeping a dual focus on the presentation of the heroine within the audiovisual text, with particular emphasis on *mise en scène*, as well as the various punishments and rewards of the narrative, before finishing with some points on fan activity. In this way, although the emphasis is on the text itself, the relationship between external environment and audience can also be kept in view. The focus remains on the text itself however, rather than on fan activity with the text.

Chapter 2 begins with the series of male/female partnerships in *The Avengers* (ITV, 1961–9), 1980s curio *Sapphire & Steel* (ITV, 1979–82) and the hugely successful *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993–2002, 2016–18). The relationship power dynamics at the heart of the drama will be explored alongside the mysterious forces that ultimately appear to control the unconventional couples. Witches are at the heart of the next chapter, a folklore figure of terror, seemingly drawn from the mists of time, but as this chapter exploring US 1960s sitcom *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–72), *Charmed* (The WB, 1998–2006), *American Horror Story: Coven* (FX, 2013) and the Netflix hit *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix, 2020–ongoing) makes clear, the witch in these stories is a twentieth-century invention. Chapter 4 takes us to the most numerous of the Cult TV heroines – the warrior. This chapter explores heroines for whom violence is a particular attribute, focusing on *Wonder Woman* (ABC/CBS 1975–79), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Renaissance Pictures, 1995–2001), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (20th Century Fox, 1997–2003) and *Wynonna Earp* (Syfy, 2016–2021). Chapter 5 examines the strangest and most unstable iteration of Cult TV heroines, those who are evolving, represented by a collection of hybrids – the cyborg Jaime Somers in *The Bionic Woman* (NBC, 1976–8), the genetic experiments Max in *Dark Angel* (Fox, 2000–2) and *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015–19). The final chapter surveys the issues for female leaders, with particular focus on *Star Trek Voyager* (CBS, 1995–2001) and *Star Trek Discovery* (CBS All Access, 2017–ongoing).

Audiences might engage with Cult TV for all sorts of reasons, but the focus of *this* book is on the female characters, past and present. In these shows we can see a kind of history of women and feminism, a clear development of their roles and capabilities, although not inevitably becoming more progressive with time. However, because the stories are fantasy, speculative, imaginative, attempting to envision, re-envision what women (and men) might be like, we can also see that some developments, prefigured in the imaginative realm, then become possible within material reality. Perhaps it is time for another leap of imagination to take our heroines to fresh territory. It had been the plan to include *Doctor Who* through the long line of the Doctor's companions, but then the Doctor herself underwent that significant regeneration. Things can change.

The Cult TV composite

Cult TV is a media and cultural phenomenon which appears in the mid to late twentieth century and refers to a broad range of television programmes that audiences relate to in particularly passionate ways. As the title suggests, this book is a broadly gendered approach to Cult TV and as such the obvious place to start is with the twin questions of genre and of heroines: what is Cult TV and how does it depict its female characters?

However, many books on Cult TV begin with an account of the diversity of programmes that could come under such consideration. Gwennllian-Jones and Pearson (2004) note discussions about the inclusion of *The Simpsons* and the World Federation Wrestling at the start of their book. David Lavery likewise begins *The Essential Cult TV Reader* (2010) with an account of a disagreement over whether *Gray's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005–ongoing) should be included (Lavery, 2010, p. 2), despite being a medical precinct drama in a realist style. The term Cult TV has ranged through sf, horror, fantasy, children's television, nostalgia texts and beyond, remaining an alarmingly expansive term.

The programmes under discussion in this book are not so variegated. They are all drama and all fall towards the fantasy end of Cult TV. In choosing to focus on the fantasy end of the spectrum, I do not mean to suggest that other types of programme are not 'cult', but rather that when looking at the role of women in such dramas, the combination of 'what is' and 'what may be' is highlighted in illuminating ways within fantasy shows. However, in accepting a narrowing of the type of programme under discussion, questions about the nature of genre itself and its place for both industry and audiences are raised. Cult TV is not a traditional genre. It is a complex amalgam of activities, effects and affects. It is a mosaic; a molecule rather than an atom; a composite cultural construction: all of which goes some way to explaining why it is so difficult to conclusively define. However, the first chapter of this book will try to sketch out the fuzzy boundaries of this composite phenomenon through a three-part approach.

Firstly, the 'external environment' is explored: the role of technology, the importance of the audience and finally the response of the industry to the business potential of the phenomenon. These interactions have acted as a kind of virtuous cycle for the television industry which at least partly explains Cult TV's subsequent shift from niche to mainstream.

The second part of the composite is the text itself. Although the role of audiences in Cult TV has become the dominant debate in academic circles, I will argue that the text itself has a key role to play. It is a liminal space, or it creates a liminal space, for the audience to indulge in its imaginative, creative, ludic activities. Here we will tackle the question of genre and fantasy, and the role of imagination. Drawing attention to the liminality of the text which demonstrates its action in linking the external environment of production context, with the internal environment, the final element of the composite.

The 'internal environment' denotes a psychological element which has been partially explored using Freudian/Lacanian approaches or Winnicott's concept of transitional objects, but I will be referring to Jung's model of the psyche with its view of the unconscious as an active agent, and the related concepts of the transcendent function and active imagination.

This tripartite model of Cult TV allows for a fuller explanation of the psychological attraction of the phenomenon than has been attempted before. There is a sticky, permeable boundary between the viewer and the text, or perhaps a liminal space made of viewer *and* the text, that warrants further investigation, but in choosing to focus on the heroines of the dramas, in this book the text will remain the primary site of investigation.

The external environment: Business, technology and audiences

The first focus of the Cult TV composite is the external environment to understand how and why programmes come to be made and how they are consumed. Public service broadcasting notwithstanding, television is primarily a business with the aim of making programmes that audiences want to watch in order to attract advertisers. Technological changes affect both audience consumption practices and business strategies, and for Cult TV this led to a virtuous cycle.

Technology has long been a driver of change in the television industry forcing adaptation of business models as producers go in search of audiences. These shifts have come to be characterized as TV I, TV II, TV III and

perhaps now TV IV. This terminology was originally coined by TV industry magazine editor Steve Behrens in 1986, who used the term TV I to refer to the era of network dominance in US television, roughly 1948–75, and TV II as the post-network era when other forms of broadcasting, such as satellite or cable, became more available. In 1996, Reeves, Rodgers and Epstein began discussing further technological change in television exploring the effect of *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993–2018) on US television, revisiting their definitions in 2002. They proposed the term TV III to cover a post-1995 era of growing digital broadcasting with even *more* channel availability placing ever greater emphasis on brand identity. In 2018 Dunleavy reworked some of their points to include the term ‘multiplatform’ and the growth of nonlinear broadcasting and streaming services, but Jenner (2018) made the case for streaming services led by Netflix constituting a further major shift in the industry, justifying its categorization as TV IV. Cult TV dramas such as *Star Trek* have often been at the forefront of such changes.

Video was another disruptor, which became available to the general consumer from the early 1970s with Sony’s Video Cassette Recorder (VCR). Audiences could now purchase their favourite programmes and watch them as often as they wished, whenever they wished. Control was shifting towards the audience, but there was an even more disruptive technology emerging in the late 1990s: the internet. However, this was not just another means of ever-faster content delivery to the audience, the rise of what was dubbed by DiNucci in 1999 as Web 2.0 marked a transition from essentially static web pages to an ever greater emphasis on user-generated content and social media tools. This gave everyone (with enough economic capital and education) the ability to publish directly to the web. It became easier and easier for Cult TV fans to find each other, to chat online and share not only reviews but other kinds of creative work, creating along the way communities of taste, explored at length by Henry Jenkins in 2006, 2013 and 2016. We will come back to Jenkins’s important contribution to the Cult TV debate in due course.

These were all changes key to the development of Cult TV audiences. It was a dramatic shift from scarcity, controlled by the television channels, to an abundance of always-available content largely controlled by the audience, a trend that has only intensified with the growth in subscription services such as Netflix. So over the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, technology had revolutionized the availability of television content, leading to changes in the habits of audiences who now take scheduling into their own hands. The role of Cult TV in this landscape has been of increasing business importance with its ability to aggregate what had been relatively niche

audiences dispersed in space and time. Cult TV texts also fostered intense fan engagement that lasted, meaning that 'cult' has been shifting from the margins to the mainstream for some time. MIPCOM, an annual conference of major international industry content providers and distributors, noted in 2018 that 29 per cent of all Netflix Originals that year were science fiction or fantasy as these were the most preferred genres amongst Netflix subscribers (McLaughlin, 2018).

As we can see, it is difficult to discuss one aspect of the Cult TV composite alone: technology and audiences are intimately intertwined, for as technology granted audiences more control over what they could watch and when, their choices began to affect commissioning decisions.

The term audience 'refers simply to the act of viewing, reading, or listening to media texts' (Casey et al., 2008, p. 22), and whilst of course, audiences are essential to any form of television, for Cult TV they have become central to understanding the phenomenon. 'Cult' comes from the Latin word *cultus* meaning 'worship' as in a religious cult, so a cult audience is one which demonstrates fervent devotion to their show. This term was used in the early days of academic interest in Cult TV, to emphasize the idea that what Cult TV audiences were doing was a niche activity and not mainstream audience behaviour. Cult TV audiences, it was argued, were different. They were worshippers of the programme – 'fan', being an abbreviated version of 'fanatic' which Jenkins traced back again to the Latin word *fanaticus*, which originally meant 'a temple servant, a devotee' (Jenkins, 2013, p. 12) which of course circles back round to the meaning of the word 'cult'.

Cult TV fans watched their shows with great attention, but they also *did* things with it. Trekkers and Whovians showed their devotion in a number of ways: an encyclopaedic knowledge of the storylines, episodes and characters, as well as cast and crew, including special effects, and writers; writing songs; writing and re-writing stories for characters; art work of all kinds; and more complex pursuits such as learning the Klingon language. In the days before the internet, knowledge of this kind of behaviour had a limited circulation through fan clubs, newsletters, fanzines and conventions, but after the internet the reach grew exponentially and the sharing tools of Web 2.0 made it far easier for fans to connect with each other.

There have been many studies of the Cult TV audience in the age of Web 2.0, tracing their activity at various levels as they work (or perhaps play) harder than a typical mainstream audience at collaborating with the text in order to create meaning, seeming to delight in decoding the narratives, sometimes playfully and idiosyncratically. Most books exploring the phenomenon of Cult TV included at least some material on the activity of fans, but Bacon-Smith

(1992) was an early look at *Star Trek* fandom, while Jenkins & Tulloch (1995) studied the audiences of *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*. More recently the academic conversation has opened out to include fandom in many guises – see Gray, Harrington and Sandvoss (2017) and Booth (2018). There has been a significant shift in the Academy away from the analysis of texts, towards investigating what audiences are doing with texts (of all kinds, from film to music to gaming).

So technological changes in the latter part of the twentieth century meant several things to the audiences of Cult TV shows. Firstly, they were able to watch their favourite shows without having to rely on the vagaries of TV scheduling via linear broadcasting, initially through video and DVD distribution, then through other online routes. Secondly, as personal computers became more affordable and connection to the internet faster, they were able to interact with their favourite shows more directly sometimes writing their own stories, sometimes working with images from the show as stills and sometimes even re-editing their favourite scenes in a variety of different ways. This had the effect of allowing audiences to engage even more deeply with the programmes and then share the results with other fans. The growing availability of the internet and its increasing speed, and the rise of Web 2.0, meant that the opportunities to share this creative and imaginative passionate engagement with other fans have grown. There are for example many easy hosting options for websites developed and maintained by fans, such as <http://fandom.wikia.com>, a wiki site which runs its own contributor programme, where the reward for writing articles is not wages, but ‘swag’ as they put it, but what amounts to special access to industry events and conventions.

The growth in fan activity has also meant that although earlier Cult TV was often relatively low budget, production money has followed the audience and many of the shows mentioned in this book are big budget, quality productions. As Johnson (2005) has convincingly argued, the place of Cult TV in contemporary scheduling was no sudden aberration but a logical development of trends in American television, while Abbott (2010) pointed out that there had been a blurring of lines between what had been thought of as Cult TV and what had been thought of as quality drama. Globally the smaller cult audiences are aggregated through subscription video on demand services, and with the growth of binge watching and long form drama, a ‘cult’ audience has become more valuable than ever. However, technology and production priorities alone do not account for the special relationship between audience and Cult TV text.

Having established the external environment that encouraged Cult TV to flourish, we must now turn our attention to the second element of the Cult TV

composite: the text itself, the touch point between the external environment of industry and the internal environment of the audiences' psyches. Although the focus of media studies has certainly shifted towards fandom, the text remains the catalyst, the filling in the sandwich, the *agent provocateur* even, for all the activity which takes place with it and around it.

The text: Genre, fantasy and liminal space

Inevitably, any discussion circling around Cult TV texts has to pass through the question of genre. What type of text is under discussion? *Is Cult TV a genre?* It is a reasonable question. If we can identify a group of texts that seem to have something in common, and there is a label for such texts, then we ought to be able to define them as a genre, but this question is asked of Cult TV over and over again without easy answer. Defining boundaries, outlining stylistic hallmarks, or repertoires of elements and narrative structures in anything like a concise way becomes very quickly difficult and leads to the conclusion that perhaps it is not a genre, after all, at least not in any traditional sense. To paraphrase the point Buscombe made about Hollywood Westerns back in 1970 – if we want to know what Cult TV is we must look at certain types of programmes, but how do we know which programmes to look at until we know what Cult TV *is*? This section will explore some of the issues around genre, look more closely at the question of the fantasy genre and then conclude with a discussion of the particular question of 'style' in Cult TV.

At its most basic, genre is a kind of taxonomy, a scientific term for classifying animals and plants, for example, based on their shared characteristics. At its core, genre is simply a way of classifying objects based on their similarity and difference to other objects. However, the association with scientific principles can be misleading because it assumes that these 'classifications are like standards: formalised, durable rules' (Frow, 2015, pp. 56–7), but problems emerge when attempting to find such durable rules for *cultural* objects because boundaries in culture tend towards fuzziness rather than clarity.

Within literature the attempt to classify output has a long history, though it is one of many stops and starts. One writer suggests that genre theory 'possesses one of the oldest pedigrees in the history of Western, Eurocentric literary and cultural criticism' (Caraher in Strong & Stevenson, 2006, p. 29), a pedigree which confidently and regularly stakes a claim to its origins in Ancient Greece, so often seen as the foundation of western culture. This claim for the longevity