

Doctor Who

Matt Hills

Doctor Who might seem to be a textbook example of a cult TV series: it falls into the genre of “telefantasy”; it has a well-established and vocal international fan base (the *Doctor Who* Appreciation Society was formed in 1976); it has run, with lengthy interruptions, since 1963; and, as such, it arguably occupies a place in British TV history as a cultural institution in its own right (Hills, “*Doctor Who*”). The show concerns the adventures, across space and time, of a time lord known only as “the Doctor,” an alien with two hearts who can “regenerate” or change his bodily form. Often accompanied on his travels by human companions, the Doctor has transformed many times and at the time of this writing is played by David Tennant.

However, *Doctor Who*’s cult status may not be quite so clear-cut. Recently, Tom Spilsbury, editor of the official *Doctor Who Magazine*, argued that the 2005 version of the program, made by BBC Wales, should not be described as a cult show: “There’s something about the word [*cult*] that somehow implies it’s a *minority* interest. You wouldn’t call football ‘a cult sport,’ would you? Or The Beatles ‘a cult band?’ . . . So does ‘being a bit spacey’ automatically qualify a TV series as ‘cult?’ . . . Last Christmas Day, *Doctor Who* was watched by over 13 million viewers. . . . That’s more people than watched anything else on TV [in the United Kingdom] last year, bar the immediately following episode of *EastEnders*. . . . So if you ask me, it’s high time we dropped the whole ‘cult’ thing” (Spilsbury 3). The suggestion here is that *Doctor Who*’s recent ratings success and newfound status as a flagship BBC program make it a “mainstream” TV program rather than cult TV, which Spilsbury links to a “niche audience” or so-called minority tastes.

If the equation of cult with a non- or anti-mainstream identity is accepted, then Spilsbury's contention carries some force. Indeed, it could be asserted that for much of its cultural life *Doctor Who* has actually occupied the mainstream of British television programming: "Unlike . . . Trekkers. . . *Doctor Who* fans in the UK didn't think of the series as in any way 'Cult.' It was as mainstream as it got until 1980, and the foundation of fandom came at the time when activities associated with Punk . . . seemed more useful to us. . . . It was a very blokey world, characterised by piss-taking, quite unlike the . . . American [cult TV fan] scene" (Wood 171). Fan critic Tat Wood views *Doctor Who* as a TV series that wasn't born into cult status but rather had cult identity thrust upon it at a certain point in its history. As the show began to lose ratings and apparent popularity during the 1980s, Wood suggests that it was recontextualized and viewed as cult, whereas previously it had been thoroughly part of the cultural mainstream.

In his cultural history of the program, *Inside the TARDIS*, James Chapman similarly notes: "The trend in the 1980s . . . was towards an increasingly segmented and compartmentalised view of audiences . . . the family audience was dissipating. . . . Thus it was that in its final years, *Doctor Who* became a marginal series made for a 'cult' rather than a mainstream audience" (162; see also Johnson, *Telefantasy* 13; Hills, *Fan Cultures*). Rather than this shift from mainstream to cult being a matter of changing audience tastes or loyalties or some reflection of the program's alleged loss of quality, Chapman attributes *Doctor Who*'s shifting fortunes to a changed TV industry. Discourses of cult fandom as constituting a niche, or specialist, audience emerged in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, repositioning *Doctor Who* within the concept of mass audience "fragmentation" and displacing those discourses of a "family," demographic-crossover show that had previously given rise to, and made sense of, the program's format in the U.K. context (Tulloch and Alvarado).

Following the likes of Chapman, Spilsbury, and Wood, it seems that rather than always being a cult TV program, *Doctor Who* may well have veered into and out of this realm. Apparently, it became cult from the 1980s to its reimagining in 2005, at which point it reverted to its 1960–1970s status as mainstream and widely popular (Hills, "'Gothic' Body Parts"). Nevertheless, this argument neglects to consider differences in the program's transnational career. As Wood notes, the activities and cultures of U.K. fans may well have strongly differed, historically, from

U.S.-based fan cultures surrounding TV science fiction, the assumed heartland of cult television (Wood 213). Francesca Coppa's useful history of American media fandom points out that "it was only in 1978 that the Tom Baker seasons were sold to PBS, where they attained a growing and fervent cult status through the 1980s. . . . Media fandom's affinity for the Doctor was only the most recent example of its growing BBC obsession . . . and 'British Media' became a catchall phrase indicating a love of a number of otherwise disparate British shows" (51).

Therefore, we may need to consider not just the changing *times* of *Doctor Who's* cult status in the United Kingdom but also the different national *spaces* of its cultishness. As part of the British media not widely watched or recognized in the States, and appealing to specialist fan tastes there, *Doctor Who's* status as cult TV may have been more consistent in America, connoting a foreign exoticism or cultish "otherness" that it lacked in its British home. Scholars such as Catherine Johnson (2–3) have stressed the importance of analyzing cult TV as a matter of audience interpretations and activities rather than seeking to root it in genre-like categories such as telefantasy. However, this binary of text and audience tends to downplay how the textual qualities and attributes of *Doctor Who* may have incited, invited, or variously led to audience responses and classifications as cult.

Chief among these textual attributes is the program's highly unusual conflation of ordinary, everyday elements and extraordinary, fantastical aspects. In the book-length academic study *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text*, John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado emphasize that the series' 1963 inception insistently constructed its own "television discourse" as one of the "normal and uncanny" (16). The show is marked by recurrent "strangeness," depicting ordinary cultural objects, such as the then-common police box (a construction used by police to temporarily confine suspects), as unearthly and weird: "From the beginning the TARDIS [police box] was conceived as something concrete and familiar, fitting in naturally with its environment, and yet narratively defined as 'odd' and 'incongruous'" (Tulloch and Alvarado 27). Far from beginning as out-and-out science fiction, *Doctor Who's* format was initiated via this narrative-visual collision of present-day settings and fantastical content, amounting to a wholesale making-strange of the familiar.

In *Time and Relative Dissertations in Space*, David Butler contrasts the opening 1963 episode with the 1996 TV movie starring Paul McGann, arguing that the balance of strangeness and familiarity, surre-

alism and realism, is entirely different in the latter: “Whereas the 1963 episode takes familiar genres and icons and makes them strange . . . the 1996 TV Movie goes out of its way to explain *Doctor Who*’s strangeness through familiar models (incorporating elements . . . and terms from *The X-Files* . . . , *Terminator 2*, *ER* . . . , *Star Trek*, and so on) right down to the music as the uncanny electronic theme tune is transformed into a generic piece of orchestral bombast” (Butler, “How to Pilot” 28). The spirit of *Who* as cultish invoked here is one of defamiliarization; by contrast, the TV movie is interpreted as textually conventional and conservative due to its attempts to contain strangeness. In the early series, audience-identificatory characters are shocked by the TARDIS and by the fact that it is “bigger on the inside.” In the later movie, these moments of character hesitation—can such a thing as the TARDIS possibly exist, or is its console room some sort of illusion?—are displaced by far more blasé narrative responses: “What is crucially missing [in the 1996 TV movie] is the [natural-supernatural] hesitancy that Todorov argues is an essential feature of the . . . ‘fantastic’ . . . glib reaction to the TARDIS’ mindboggling nature removes the sense of wonder but also deprives the audience of a character through which their own hesitancy at *Doctor Who*’s narrative can be expressed” (Butler, “How to Pilot” 29).

However, the balance of uncanniness and normality is pushed firmly back toward defamiliarization and natural-supernatural hesitation in the opening episode of the show’s 2005 reimagining. It introduces the ninth Doctor (Christopher Eccleston) battling against animated shop-window dummies, all viewed through the eyes of department store assistant Rose Tyler (Billie Piper). Rose refuses to accept the existence of alien entities, speculating instead that the spookily sentient mannequins are the result of some sort of student prank. This story is “strong as both a pilot [for new audiences] and a restoration [for the show’s established fan audiences], told completely from the angle of a supporting character” (Lyon, *Back to the Vortex* 225).

Doctor Who seems to have inspired and earned cult status, then, in large part due to its “genuinely disturbing, radical and unusual” confluences of fantasy and contemporary reality, as well as the fact that the main character’s ability to change his appearance and regenerate prevents audiences from settling into a sense of cozy familiarity (Newman, *Doctor Who* 63). But it can also be argued that the program’s iconic sound and design have contributed greatly to its cult status, especially given that the soundscape has remained virtually unchanged from 1963 to

2008, as has the appearance of many visual designs, such as the TARDIS interior. In each case, sound and visual imagery have been tweaked over the years, but identifiable fundamentals have remained in place, perhaps as a testament to their very alienness: “The series used sound in an iconic way. . . . One could argue that sound ‘starred’ rather than simply being there to convince audiences of the veracity of screen representations. The relaunched 2005 series . . . has demonstrated great awareness and respect for these ‘sonic stars,’ with returning effects including the TARDIS materialisation/dematerialisation, the Autons’ handgun, and the . . . Dalek control room” (Donnelly 197).

Fans have always paid very close attention to the sounds and designs of *Doctor Who*, but most scholarship has focused on the show’s narratives, genres, and ideologies. Along with Kevin Donnelly’s work, another rare exception to this rule is the outstanding study of visual design by Piers Britton and Simon Barker. These writers argue that it would be “no exaggeration to say that the long-term success of the show was based on two virtuosically stylised designs. Both almost verged on abstraction. . . . First came the interior of the Doctor’s ship, the TARDIS. . . . Even more popular were the inhabitants of . . . the planet Skaro . . . the Daleks. . . . [Both] established the benchmark for spectacle in the series” (134; see also Schuster and Powers 27). In each case, these visual spectacles—pop-modernist images of the alien—were frequently represented in conjunction with cultural ordinariness; the TARDIS console room was diegetically inside a police box disguise, and the Daleks invaded earth as early as their second appearance on the program in 1964 and were still trying in 2008. Just as the BBC Wales’ incarnation of *Doctor Who* has respected “sonic stars,” so too has it respected “visual icons,” modifying the TARDIS interior but in such a way as to echo the hexagonal and circular motifs of the original Peter Brachacki realization (Britton and Barker 185). And even though the Dalek casing design has been updated to make it seem more metallic, tanklike, and solid, it is still very much iconically recognizable. If *Doctor Who*’s textual address can be described as cultish due to its uncanniness, with the familiar becoming strange, then it can also be described as cultish thanks to its specific aural and visual icons of otherworldly otherness sustained across some forty-five years.

These arguments all suggest that *Doctor Who*’s cult status might be both text based and audience based rather than a binary either-or. That other binary—cult versus mainstream—also has a major conceptual dif-

ficuity: it implies that TV shows can be objectively and univocally fixed in one or the other category at any given moment in time in any given broadcasting environment, rather than approaching cult status as potentially multivocal and linked to a range of different interpretive communities. To put it another way, a text can be ostensibly mainstream, perhaps in the manner of the BBC Wales *Doctor Who*, yet still have cult fan audiences reading it in the light of detailed fan knowledge of the show's longer history. Similarly, if one accepts that *Doctor Who* was mainstream and not cult in the United Kingdom prior to the 1980s, then the 1976 formation of the *Doctor Who* Appreciation Society—bringing together generations of fans who had watched the show since the 1960s and built up years of textual expertise—seems to run counter to the idea that the program was definitively and univocally mainstream at that point in time, lacking any cult following or identity whatsoever. By contrast, it may be entirely possible for a TV show to be both cult and mainstream at the same time. Once a show has been dubbed cult and attracted a fan culture, even if it subsequently gains (or regains) widespread cultural recognition and mainstream ratings, its cult following will surely continue to operate, distinctively reading and speculating over the particular program.

Specific attempts to fix *Doctor Who* as either cult or mainstream have also marginalized another unusual change in the program's status, something that has occurred partly as a result of the program's long history. When the show's return was announced in 2004—it had been off the air as an ongoing series since 1989—an article in the British broadsheet the *Guardian* reported the following: “The Time Lord's new lease of life could be put down to simple nostalgia, but according to Clayton Hickman, [then] editor of *Doctor Who* magazine, more sinister forces are at work. ‘The Doctor Who mafia,’ he says. ‘That's why the show's coming back. If it wasn't for all the fans in high places, it would have just faded away.’ Russell T. Davies, the writer overseeing the show's revival, is a case in point” (Bodle 4). Davies, a longtime fan of *Doctor Who*, had previously written a spin-off novel, *Damaged Goods* (1996), targeted squarely at the program's cult fandom. In this case, then, fandom is not just an audience identity: *Doctor Who*'s fans have officially taken over the running of the show.

Davies is not alone. Many writers on the BBC Wales version, along with its producer Phil Collinson, are self-identified fans. Many have participated in socially organized fandom and have published niche,

fan-targeted fiction, including Paul Cornell, Mark Gatiss, Steven Moffat, Gareth Roberts, and Robert Shearman. The actor playing the tenth Doctor, David Tennant, has also been a fan of the program since childhood. This version of the show, whether or not the current editor of *Doctor Who Magazine* believes it should be described as cult, is made by and stars media professionals who are also part of *Who*'s cult fan audience. Rather than directly contrasting fan audiences' interpretation of the text with producers' control over it (see Tulloch and Jenkins 145), these highly privileged producer-fans can seemingly have it all.

Such fan-pro crossing over has also given rise to instances of metacult television, or cult TV about cult TV. For example, the episode "Love & Monsters" concerns one of the Doctor's fan groups: "I don't recall ever seeing a more controversial episode. . . . [This] shows us who we are, rather than who the Doctor is . . . [representing] *Doctor Who* fans and their experiences" (Lyon, *Back to the Vortex—Second Flight* 297). This metacult strand even extends to the Doctor appearing as a kind of uncanny DVD extra in "Blink" (Walker, *Third Dimension* 218–19) and to Tennant's own fandom being connoted by dialogue between the tenth and fifth Doctors in "Time Crash": "You were *my* Doctor." If anything, it is perhaps unsurprising that it has taken *Doctor Who* more than forty years of time travel to edge from cult status toward sustained metacult. The program has been loved by generations of fans, and right now it is being created in Cardiff by a lucky few of those self-same fans.