

Torchwood

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Cult television sometimes appears to be an accident, consolidated by unpredicted and unpredictable fan audience activity, as was arguably the case for the original *Doctor Who* series (BBC, 1963–1989). And it may occasionally appear to be intended, programmed, and designed as such—a matter of targeting specific fan and niche audiences with material deemed culturally “nonmainstream” or challenging. *Torchwood* (an anagram of *Doctor Who*) can reasonably be described as the latter type of cult TV. It is a *Who* spin-off; its lead character, Captain Jack Harkness (played by John Barrowman), first appeared in the 2005 BBC Wales reimagining of that series. But whereas the cult of *Doctor Who* emerged over time and in response to the show’s format, mythology, unusual lead character, and child-adult crossover status, it is hard to view *Torchwood* as anything other than cult by design. It inevitably had a ready-made fan following in the United Kingdom by virtue of its emergence from Russell T. Davies’s work on *Doctor Who*; indeed, it can be argued that *Torchwood* was cult TV from the moment of its first preproduction announcement on October 17, 2005. It was promoted and billed as a “sci-fi paranoid thriller . . . for BBC Three . . . announced today by Stuart Murphy, Controller of BBC Three [and] . . . aimed at a post-water-shed audience. . . . [It’s] a cop show with a sense of humour. . . . It’s dark, wild and sexy, it’s *The X-Files* meets *This Life*’ [says Davies]” (BBC press release cited in Walker, *Inside the Hub* 12–13).

Linked to the brand identity of one of the BBC’s free-view digital channels, *Torchwood* was **intertextually connected in this earliest publicity** to shows such as “*Casanova* . . . *Bodies*, *Conviction* and *Outlaws*, with which [BBC3 had] . . . begun to establish a reputation for cutting-

edge British drama” (Walker, *Inside the Hub* 12–13). It was thereby positioned industrially as “high-end” or quality TV, “edgy” in its ambitions. “The multichannel environment has afforded opportunities through new channels aiming only for relatively small audiences in the first instance to try out challenging production ideas. Even established institutions such as the BBC have been able through the new, Freeview, digital provision with its new channels (BBC3 and BBC4) to test the water in respect of drama which might well not have been commissioned for mainstream channels” (Nelson, *State of Play* 76).

Torchwood initially premiered on BBC3 in the United Kingdom, and season 2 premiered on BBC2. Either way, *Torchwood* is contextualized as a minority or niche drama rather than a mainstream (and thus BBC1) show. As a “post-watershed” program, it is designed to be broadcast after 9 P.M., following the long-standing convention in British TV that equates this time slot with material not suitable for children (a pre-watershed edit of *Torchwood* premiered in 2008). It is therefore not merely a spin-off of the family entertainment of *Doctor Who*’s action-adventure telefantasy (Johnson, *Telefantasy*); its cult-by-design status—or, at the very least, its cult by association with *Doctor Who* and its established fan base—supposedly offers a more adult, sophisticated franchise. In the United States, where *Doctor Who* is less widely known, *Torchwood* could not be treated as having a ready-made audience of loyal fans. There, the program was more actively promoted to a niche audience of genre or cult fans. To this end, lead writer Chris Chibnall attended “Comic-Con, courtesy of BBC America, to promote the September launch of *Torchwood* series one in America. . . . I’d been told to expect a convention of 5000 people but, over the four days, I think it was nearer 100,000! It’s the largest convention of its kind in the world, and a gathering like no other. The two-hour *Torchwood* panel is packed to the rafters. . . . 6 September 2007: USA. *Torchwood* launches on BBC America, and we’re a hit! It’s the channel’s highest-rated show of all time” (Chibnall 65).

Targeted at genre or cult fans, then, *Torchwood* redeploys familiar tropes. Its lead character is effectively immortal, and it features a rift in space-time through which any number of alien creatures can appear. Its status as both cult and adult transgressive TV is marked in a number of ways, and not just by use of the word *fuck* in the opening moments of episode 1 or the depiction of a character masturbating in episode 2. Its adult content is never simply a matter of breaking sexual or linguistic taboos. As fan commentator Stephen James Walker notes, “raising [the]

... question of the existence, or otherwise, of life after death, *Torchwood* ventures into some very deep religious and philosophical territory, in a way that *Doctor Who* probably never could. . . . This . . . really delivers on the promise of a thought-provoking adult series” (*Inside the Hub* 173).

Unusual for a program that, as telefantasy, deals with extraterrestrials and supernatural forces, *Torchwood* is preoccupied with a materialist, atheistic stance in which there is no life after death; there is just blackness, an everlasting nothingness. This emphasis can no doubt be read in relation to the beliefs of Russell T. Davies, the show’s creator, but in any case, it is a rather remarkable element to discover alongside the program’s narrative and fantastical format (see Hills, *Fan Cultures* on the focal narrative questions posed by cult TV). Tensions between representing the supernatural (as generic telefantasy) and maintaining a materialist philosophy emerge and are dramatized across the series’ run. For instance, “the whole premise of ‘Random Shoes’ seems to be completely at odds with the usual *Torchwood* doctrine—established in ‘Everything Changes’ and reinforced in ‘They Keep Killing Suzie’—that there is no afterlife, save perhaps for an eternal dark nothingness” (Walker, *Inside the Hub* 184). And the finale of season 1, “End of Days” (written by Chris Chibnall), plays, connotatively at least, somewhat against the established atheism of the program by depicting Captain Jack Harkness as a Christlike figure. Despite such creative tensions between genre and theological concepts, the script for “They Keep Killing Suzie” (1.8; written by Paul Tomalin and Daniel McCulloch, with uncredited input from Davies) explicitly links the series’ antireligious positioning with adult sophistication of thought. The character of Suzie Costello (Indira Varma) caustically remarks to Gwen (Eve Myles) that her belief in heaven as a sort of “white light” is just the sort of childish faith that has “never left primary school.” Here, any belief in life after death is strongly depicted as a compensatory and consoling value system rather than a grown-up recognition of harsher realities. *Torchwood*’s “rift” may strongly resemble *Buffy*’s “Hellmouth” in narrative terms and possibilities, but whereas the latter is inscribed within religious concepts, the former is stoutly secular.

Torchwood’s critical and fan reception has not always validated the show’s publicity and industry contextualization as being more “adult” than *Doctor Who*. In particular, noted British TV critic Charlie Brooker, who has written for the left-wing broadsheet the *Guardian* and pre-

sented his own BBC digital TV show, *Screen Wipe*, argues: “The trouble with *Who*’s freshly-minted . . . ‘sister’ serial *Torchwood* . . . is that it’s not really clear who it’s aimed at. It contains swearing, blood and sex, yet still somehow feels like a children’s program. Thirteen-year-olds should love it; anyone else is likely to be more than a little confused. Which isn’t to say *Torchwood* is bad. Just bewildering.” Brooker alleges that despite the program’s inclusion of sex and gore, its telefantasy adventure elements—the high-tech SUV, an invisible entrance to the Hub via a magic paving stone, the Doctor’s severed hand preserved in a jar—add a childish aspect to the otherwise adult content, resulting in a bizarre and jarring mixture of tonalities. As Walker observes, a “frequent fan complaint [is] that *Torchwood* has an uneven tone” (*Inside the Hub* 223). Walker does not entirely validate Brooker’s point, though, countering with this thoughtful reflection: “Is it really fair to suggest that the series has childish characters and/or storylines? . . . Arguably the only way this criticism makes any sort of sense is if one takes the view that there is something inherently juvenile or childish about TV science-fiction, and that presenting it in an adult context is thus bound to produce an incongruity” (*Inside the Hub* 221–22).

Indeed, there is a sense in which Brooker’s critique implies that telefantasy genre elements are connotatively childish, making the compounding of these genre identities with sex and gore “adolescent.” Yet despite Walker’s laudable reclaiming of the genre, *Torchwood* has itself equated specific religious beliefs—frequently linked to the narratives and fantastical scenarios of supernatural telefantasy—with “primary school” childishness. Thus, rather ironically, the show appears to put forward arguments that are similar to Brooker’s criticisms. Arguably, it constructs its adult textual identity at the expense of implicitly putting down the very genre it predominantly inhabits. Part of *Torchwood*’s adult textuality also seems to be premised on including the blood and gore that are visually absent in *Doctor Who*, bringing it very close to TV horror on occasion (Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror*). One example: the spurts of blood that result from a monstrous Weevil attack in “Everything Changes.”

Torchwood’s adult content is certainly not limited to its showy inclusion of sexual material, such as potential “fuck buddies” (in “Out of Time”), or to its atheistic ambivalence or to its moments of graphic gore. As Davies has pointed out, part of the program’s distinctive identity comes not from its depictions of sex but rather from its representations of *sexuality*: “There aren’t many series about bisexuals battling aliens

underneath Cardiff! . . . That is very distinct. Let's face it, there are a lot of American shows covering ground similar to ours, and the success of *Torchwood* on BBC America has been a bit of a surprise to me because of that. I feared that it might be like taking coals to Newcastle. But the research shows that Jack's sexuality, as well as the fluid sexuality that we have running throughout the show, is a unique feature" (quoted in Cook 55). To an extent, then, it can be argued that *Torchwood's* cult status reflects not just its position as a telefantasy *Doctor Who* spin-off but also its place as "authored" TV drama, interpretable as part of Russell T. Davies's body of work and hence readable through his culturally progressive and politicized "author function": "Davies has continued to include queer characters . . . with *Doctor Who*, and its subsequent spin-off, *Torchwood*. . . . Davies introduced the character of Captain Jack, a pansexual time-traveller from the 51st century (John Barrowman). . . . Certainly, Davies's contributions to 'gay television' over the last decade . . . have been considerable" (Davis 125).

Whether Captain Jack Harkness is described as "pansexual" or whether a range of *Torchwood* team members are said to depict "bisexual tension" (Brooker) or indeed a wholesale queering of fixed categories of sexuality, what emerges is a consistent stress on "fluid sexuality," as Davies codes it in interview. Characters are matter-of-factly depicted as moving between male and female object choices, without this being dramatized as any sort of issue and without narrative punishment or problematization. Ianto Jones (Gareth David-Lloyd), for instance, has a girlfriend who has been partly transformed into a cyberbeing ("Cyberwoman," 1.4) and then later has a relationship with Captain Jack. Toshiko (Naoko Mori) has a fling with an alien who has adopted the female human body as a disguise ("Greeks Bearing Gifts," 1.7) and then falls in love with Owen Harper (Burn Gorman), who is himself depicted seducing a male and female couple in "Everything Changes." Since these developments are presented without any debate or angst, the program seems to naturalize bisexuality as unremarkable or as a given—though *bisexual* is a term that crops up more in commentary than in *Torchwood* itself. The show appears to deliberately refute and deny all cultural nominations—gay, straight, bi—that might otherwise come into play to restrict characters' identities. For this alone, *Torchwood* might merit cult status as a radical and progressive challenge to contemporary ideologies of sexuality.

And note that in the earlier quote from Davies, it is not just "fluid sexuality" that separates *Torchwood* from its cult and telefantasy compet-

itors but also its setting in Wales: “battling aliens underneath Cardiff.” Though it can certainly be suggested that *Torchwood* is very knowingly post-*Buffy*—and not just in its casting of James Marsters as Captain John Hart (see Stokes; Walker, *Inside the Hub* 223)—what is interesting about the BBC Wales show is that it simultaneously seeks to co-opt and resemble markers of U.S. quality cult TV as well as reflect and refract its Welsh identity. Its signature look, involving the repeated use of helicopter shots of Cardiff, apes the glossy, high production values of U.S. TV drama, but at the same time, *Torchwood* is geographically and narratively centered on icons of the regenerated Cardiff, such as the Millennium Centre and the Bay area. This duality gives it a “glocal” feel—competing with U.S. TV not by delocalizing its characters and narratives but rather by aestheticizing its urban Cardiff locales and aiming for U.S.-style televisuality (see Caldwell). The result is less mid-Atlantic or transatlantic than bi-Atlantic, indicating a textual hybridity of U.S. TV industry form and Welsh TV industry content that seeks to intertextually link conventions and styles of U.S. genre and cult television with a very much localized agenda. Likewise, the program’s U.S.-U.K. duality is structured into its key “high-concept” precursors (“*The X-Files* meets *This Life*”), as well as playing into one of Davies’s key dialogue gags in the first story: “*CSI: Cardiff*, I’d like to see that,” mutters PC Andy.

As Eric Freedman has noted, in an essay dealing predominantly with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: “While setting is commonly under-utilised in serial narratives, it is nevertheless an important visual code. . . . Setting is typically privileged only in the opening montage sequence of any serial program. . . . Yet rather than ignore setting in favour of character, setting merits further scrutiny as a complex textual code” (163). *Torchwood*’s setting is, by contrast, not at all downplayed or restricted to opening montages. Rather, it is present front and center. Even the Hub set—effectively, the base of team *Torchwood*—is deliberately designed to include, as its centerpiece, a continuation of the iconic fountain sited in real life outside the Millennium Centre. Although American TV critics reviewing *Torchwood* may mistakenly dub Cardiff a “bleak-looking town” in Wales (Tucker) rather than recognizing it as the nation’s capital city, they are unable to wholly neglect the program’s setting, which is integral.

This Welsh identity has been prioritized in BBC Wales promotional events, such as “A Celebration of *Torchwood*” hosted at the Millennium Centre in January 2008. This included a special preview in high defini-

tion of episode 2.11, “Adrift,” written by Chris Chibnall. In interviews, Davies has specifically praised this episode, not by linking it intertextually to cult or U.S. TV precursors but by citing the “golden age” and tradition of quality British TV drama: “Episode 11 is *Play for Today*—good; it’s utterly, utterly brilliant. I wish I’d written it myself, and I don’t often say that, because I think I’m marvellous! . . . It’s very Cardiff, with a strong Welsh cast—it’s got Ruth Jones in it . . .—acting their hearts out. It’s beautiful, like a little chamber piece” (Bielby 49). In this industry discourse, *Torchwood* is not represented as bi-Atlantic; instead, it is contextualized as “very Cardiff,” even as it is articulated with markers of U.K. quality television and the single teleplay. Although these bids for “quality” status may be culturally insecure, they do suggest that *Torchwood*’s very multivocality and hybridity offer further signs of its cult status—intertextually appropriating the norms and narratives of contemporary U.S. cult TV while wearing its Welshness like a badge of honor; jamming together telefantasy genre conventions with “serious” television’s focus on materialist, atheistic questions; and radically representing sexuality while offering up “monster of the week” story lines.

Torchwood may well have been cult TV by association with its parent show, *Doctor Who*, before it was even made, let alone broadcast. But given its textual design, it has arguably earned the label of cult TV, using the genre of telefantasy as a way to target fans of previous cult TV shows and to pose existential narrative questions that might be assumed to characterize quality TV. Perhaps the debate over whether *Torchwood* is childish, adolescent, or adult misses the point, which is that, as cult television, it can hybridize, deconstruct, and cross over all these fixed, unhelpful discourses of cultural value.