

## What's in a Cult?: Paratexts as the Foundation of Cult Television

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In his introduction to *The Essential Cult TV Reader*, David Lavery points to Matt Hills' concept of "hyperdiegesis" as a key element in delineating cult television. Hills' definition of hyperdiegesis as "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen...within the text" (qtd. in Lavery, 3) can also be aligned with Jonathan Gray's understanding of paratexts as that which "constructs, lives in, and can affect the running of a text" (6). The recurring theme here is that textual boundaries become increasingly permeable in participatory television culture, and elements that exist beyond the primary text play a significant role in creating narrative meaning. Furthermore, increasing viewer interactivity allows multi-layered fan cult(ure)s to proliferate. The cult show is no longer tied to an aura of obscurity, but rather to its visibility across a variety of discursive spaces. Therefore, I argue that paratexts form the foundation of cult television by spawning expansive networks of narrative engagement.

My position relies on the assumption that within our participatory mediascape, the "cult" label becomes more about viewer activity than about the particular aesthetic or narrative elements of a series. It's true that many of the shows that come to mind when we think about cult television (*Star Trek*, *Twin Peaks*, *Firefly*, etc.) tend fit a specific bill in terms of genre, quality, and industry status. But it is no coincidence (nor any great insight) to say that these shows are canonically cult because of their intense fandoms. Whether or not we can assign any inherent artistic markers to "the cult series" is, in my opinion, secondary to the more basic point that the fans make the cult.

When I say that the fans *make* the cult, I mean it quite literally. In addition to the obvious fact that a fanbase comprises a physical cult of viewers, the various kinds of paratexts that fans consume and produce form the creative foundation of the cult series. From "official" paratexts such as websites, DVDs, and merchandise, to "unofficial" paratexts such as fan fiction, vids, and wikis (Gray), fan engagement beyond the primary televisual text is necessary to achieve cult status. This emphasis on paratexts brings me to the crux of my argument: the bar for cult television has been lowered in a major way. If we understand the fundamental element of cult tv as a high level of fan engagement that extends into spaces beyond the text, then nearly every show on television could, theoretically, qualify as a cult phenomenon. Amidst a surge in social tv platforms and transmedia marketing/storytelling practices, it seems to me that we can now say: to every show, its cult.

But what does it mean for television studies if the old ways of distinguishing a cult object no longer render the same results? If we level the playing field and concede that *American Idol* is as much a cult show as *Battlestar Galactica*, then has the word "cult" lost all meaning? Well, yes and no. If you buy my take on the matter, then discourses of television quality certainly become more complicated, since series of all levels of quality

can inspire cultish fan behavior. I really don't see how we can continue to use "cult" as a marker of quality when we examine the fan communities that form in relation to such highly varied televisual texts, and using "cult" as a genre signifier becomes increasingly problematic for the same reasons. Perhaps most importantly, if "cult" once denoted some kind of opposition to mainstream television fare, my conception eliminates this distinction entirely and complicates the cultural signifiers of popular vs. niche programming.

Exploding the cult tv canon could have some liberatory effects for television studies. Just as fan studies rearticulates the power dynamics of the media industries, understanding cult tv as a fundamentally fan-based phenomenon offers a means of challenging television categories. By complicating notions of quality and genre, a democratized version of cult tv opens up new lines of inquiry and new possibilities for comparative and contextual analysis. If we turn our attention to the hyperdiegetic operation of televisual texts and put paratextual materials on the same analytical level as the shows themselves, then cult tv becomes a more fluid framework for television studies.

#### Works Cited:

Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: NYU Press, 2010

Lavery, David. Ed. *The Essential Cult TV Reader*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010.