

Book Review: Cult television

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Postprint / Postprint

Rezension / review

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Mathijs, E. (2005). Book Review: Cult television. [Review of the book *Cult television*, by S. Gwenllian-Jones, & R. E. Pearson]. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8(3), 387-391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136754940500800309>

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Chicks fall somewhere between the two stools of medium and audience, to produce a focus on content or message which can appear dislocated.

Action Chicks is accessible in style and offers in its entirety an overview of some key issues raised by the emergence of the 'action chicks' phenomenon. Some contributors make challenging and useful contributions to the body of scholarship in the field, and I would certainly use selected extracts and chapters in my teaching. However, others have tended to neglect the embedding of their argument and/or approaches taken within critical or theoretical frameworks, in favour of detailed but impressionistic discussion of the heroines themselves.

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Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson (eds), *Cult Television*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. xx + 242 pp. ISBN 0-8166-3830-6 (hbk) \$68.95; ISBN 0-8166-3831-4 (pbk) \$22.95

The academic study of 'cult media' seems to be gaining momentum, and rightfully so. Given the widespread use of the term in contemporary culture, it is high time that the topic received attention, both in the form of critical debates and proper research into the nature, uses and implications of 'cult' in media studies. *Cult Television* adds to the depth and scope of the debate, but although it never claims to be the definitive say on the topic, it occasionally lacks the theoretical stamina that one hoped it would have.

Exempting a few studies of 'camp' (Susan Sontag) and 'subculture' (Dick Hebdige) cult film and television have only been part of academic and critical debates since the 1980s (Hebdige, 1979; Sontag, 1964). Bruce Austin's empirical 'Portrait of a Cult Film Audience' (1981), J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum's *Midnight Movies* (1983), Umberto Eco's essay on *Casablanca* (1986), Gina Marchetti's (1986) framing of cult as a set of subcultural practices and J.P. Telotte's *The Cult Film Experience* (1990) stand as academic studies among several more popular and encyclopaedic attempts (like Danny Peary's series on *Cult Movies*; 1981, 1983, 1998)

which try to come to terms with the phenomenon. All these works suggest that cult media are different from mainstream media because of the way in which they are received (with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* a key exemplar), and/or because they are, 'kind of offbeat, kind of weird, kind of strange' (Everman, 1993: 1).

This double emphasis on reception and textuality has characterized the study of cult media ever since (and especially since the 1990s) the decade from which anything qualified as cult. Henry Jenkins' (1992) work on fandom brought cult celebration into popular mass culture, whereas Jeffrey Sconce's (1995) study of exploitation aesthetics drove it back into the realm of subculture, albeit equipped with more aesthetic pretence than ever before (everyone was now a potential fan, and every bad film was someone's masterpiece). One of the starting points of the current interest in the study of cult has been the 'Defining Cult Movies' conference at the University of Nottingham, in 2000. Something of a legendary cult event itself by now, the conference made a serious attempt to discuss what 'cult' is, and how its study fitted or extended existing research and teaching briefs in academia (Jancovich et al., 2003). Since then, several publications have tried to tackle the subject from a variety of angles. *Unruly Pleasures* (Mendik and Harper, 2000) offered a series of (largely) textual analyses on cult films, singling out critical attitudes as fan approaches (and vice versa). Mark Jancovich (2002) has argued the importance of a culturalist view of reception in creating cults, and Matt Hills (2002) has singled out the particular implications of implied and anticipative fandom in his study of fan cultures. The online journal *Intensities* (www.cult-media.com) and the *Alterimage* book series (coordinated by the Cult Film Archive, see: www.wallflowerpress.co.uk), testify of approaches ranging from formalism to sociology, firmly entrenching the topic within critical debates on contemporary media. The eyebrow-raising debate on the cultural status of *Showgirls* shows to what extent a universally vilified film (one fast becoming an exemplar) invites aesthetic, sociological, ethical, feminist and historical frameworks into the study of cult (see Hunter, 2000; Mizuta et al., 2003). A book on cult television, then, seems very timely.

Overall, *Cult Television* presents a fine range of welcome additions to the study of cult. Its selection of essays and topics is well informed, and it demonstrates that the editors know what subjects are likely to demand more attention than others. It seems only logical that there are essays devoted to *The X-Files*, *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the quartet most likely to make up the canon of cult television. There does seem to be a high proportion of attention devoted to live-action science-fiction television, begging the question: why? Given the difficulty of finding a shared, common body of works that make up cult television, there must be exclusions. I have no quarrel with them, even that of *The Simpsons*. Apparently, the editors have decided against a multitude of texts



being discussed, opting instead for a small range of essays (12 in all) with a clear focus on texts that are non-disputed parts of the cult television canon. But an acknowledgement of the canonical and generic limitations would have made the selection much easier to accept.

Theoretically, *Cult Television* appears to be too prudent. In the introduction we find the obligatory reference to the double emphasis typical for studying cult when the editors state that cult applies to 'any television program that is considered offbeat or edgy, [or] that draws a niche audience' (p. ix). There is a threefold theoretical structure to the book: first, on theories of cult; second, harbouring a range of textual analyses; and third, singling out (approaches to) reception. Again, this is a logic distinction to make. But while most of the essays are confident in their discussion of the texts, they seem reluctant to push the envelope when it comes to theorizing and determining the concept of cult in itself. The two most useful essays in this respect are the first two. Both Philippe Le Guern, and Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt, advocate a Bourdieuan perspective by linking the status of texts to attitudes towards 'cult quality', exclusivity, competence and superiority with fans. Both essays carve out a similar approach towards cult television that typifies cult cinema or art worlds. But they do not explore how the ways in which cult television is different from cinema and art defines it as a topic of its own. Hence, what this book lacks is an attempt, by the editors, towards such a definition. They do not go further than observing some obvious differences between television and cinema (seriality, elasticity, longevity). This is a pity. Too many writers on cult have refrained from trying to define cult media. While one needs to appreciate the carefulness that withholds scholars from ramming home any definition, this should not lead to a refusal. One cannot go on studying a topic for more than a decade without offering at least a shot. Capturing the topic, isolating the species through definition, now seems urgent.

Cult Television is at its strongest when fans and texts are discussed. Sara Gwenllian-Jones' essay on the fictional worlds of cult television shows the intrinsic relationship between the representations of story worlds and their active reception by avid viewers, who not only fill in the gaps of these worlds, but offer virtual realities far beyond the text itself. Her four possible formats of in-text world exploration (travelogue, nodal, combination, portal) could well become templates for the study of narrative worlds altogether. Similarly, the essays by Jeffrey Sconce, Eva Vieth, and Mary Hammond provide important insights into their respective topics. The most polemic essay is probably Toby Miller's account of 'levels of rightness' used in fan interpretations of *The Avengers*. Echoing Jancovich's critique of the eagerness to assign value-judgements (so typical of fans), its warning against the short-sightedness of evaluative and exclusive tendencies is a sound one. But it also needs more than the sudden invocation of big business' exploitation of fans, or the blunt distinction between

‘progressive’ and ‘regressive’ potentials of cultism, to drive home any argument on the perceived hostility of cult fans to those who are considered lesser fans. The fierceness with which this ‘inward looking trainspotter’s’ attitude (pp. 193–4) is acted out, suggests a far more complex range of strategies and motivations than Miller acknowledges. It is not because devout cult fans do not care for non-cult fans that their use of evaluation is less complex than anyone else’s.

One small, annoying shortcoming of this book is its presentation. Like some cult media themselves, it is a decidedly ‘open text’ lacking a set of firm boundaries. But by not offering an index or a bibliography on the topic, *Cult Television* limits its usability as a work of research. In the end, *Cult Television* is a fun read for everyone interested in fiction television. Theoretically it is an addition to the status quo of the field rather than a radical intervention in it. It never tries (nor claims) to be more than a collection of essays on a shared topic. This is also its quality. It is careful, useful and thorough in its pursuit of the study of particular cult television texts.

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Will Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: Sage, 2001. vi + 205 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 0–7619–5232–2 (hbk); ISBN 0–7619–5233–0 (pbk) £14.99

The Wild West appears to be another book reading the cowboy in terms of his mythic relevance to American self-understanding. However, Wright reverses the expected focus and concentrates on various understandings of the social contract using the cowboy and westerns to dramatize the relation of the individual to society in American life and institutions. From Hobbes and Adam Smith, through Marx, Weber and Durkheim, Wright takes us on an entertaining canter through different versions of theory relating to American market society, illustrating them through what he terms America's 'social myth of origin' (p. 1). In the last third of the book, he considers, in more of a gallop, the familiar intersections of myth and power by way of chapters on women, Native Americans and the environment.

As a work of cultural studies, *The Wild West* is an intriguing introduction to the central thinkers and issues that underlie our understanding of the emergence and maintenance of civil society. The existence of an open frontier was fulcrum to American thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, as we might expect, but also to European thinkers such as Locke, for whom the availability of the wilderness (to white males) was necessary to his concepts of man (*sic*) and nature. Wright takes the reader patiently through various ways of thinking the individual and the market, sometimes too patiently and repetitively for the advanced reader, but the expository clarity means that this could serve as an excellent coursebook in social theory. Moreover, it is differentiated from more conventional treatments of these areas by the way he inflects the topics constantly with examples drawn from the myth of the frontier and the cowboy.

This use of the cowboy is much more than simply illustrative or supposedly student-friendly (indeed, film studies tells us of the unpopularity of the western among students nowadays), for Wright has a serious point to