**‘Do you want to come with me?’ Intertextual stardom, paratexts and the dialectics of mainstream cult TV**

In the first TV trailer for the re-launched, and now globally successful, cult BBC TV series *Doctor Who (2005-)* the new Doctor played by Christopher Eccleston said to the camera: ‘Do you want to come with me?’ The question asked whether potential viewers wanted to embark on an adventure with the Doctor, but also with a new actor who brought his own TV history to the role. Indeed, the BBC’s promotional strategy focused heavily on the stardom of Eccleston, an actor with cult credits including his lead role in the film *Shallow Grave* (1997). The BBC foregroundedEccleston’s acting heritage in the first press release about the series, opening with the words ‘Acclaimed Actor Christopher Eccleston plays *Doctor who* ’. Eccleston not only bought intertextual connections to other cult texts but also to serious TV drama. Intertextuality has long been considered a key attribute of cult TV texts; cult TV often makes references to other cult shows or remixes genres. In this paper, I examine two case studies of TV stars from *Doctor Who*, to trace the multiple ways that their stardom and intertextualities were commodified as part of promotional strategies to develop mainstream cult TV. This enabled the BBC to build audiences made up of fans seeking cult texts but also less interested viewers with wider generic interests; their stardoms were drivers in dialectical relationships of the cult and mainstream. This, I contend, further blurs the boundaries between the text, publicity and stardom, in terms of how we define cult TV.

**Introduction**

There has been a considerable debate about the relationship between an actor’s star status and their character in cult TV. As Roberta E. Pearson argues, ‘cult television may entangle actor with character more than with other television fictions’ (2004: 62). Thus, the suggestion is that the characterisation of a cult TV character, and the cult audience’s intense relationship with that character, means that the character is more important than the actor in cult TV. Moreover, Pearson, in one of the few extended analyses of a cult TV character in relation to stardom, takes the unusual academic step of making a daring claim: ‘I believe that the imaginary qualities of cult television render characters more highly defined and complex, more capable of cutting loose from their originary texts, than non-cult characters’(screen 7, 2003). She goes on to highlight the examples of the *X-Files* (1993-) and *Buffy the Vampire* (1997-2003) websites, comparing them with *ER* (1994-2009) and the *Sopranos* (1999-2007) sites, to highlight that the former has biographies of the characters as well as the actors, whereas the latter only has the actors biographies. Sara Gwenllian Jones (2000) argues that the audience suspends belief to such an extent that the actor embodying the fictional character becomes almost superfluous; ‘Cult film and television audiences are more likely to understand actors as part of the cult text's repertoire, wherein character rather than performer is all-important’ (11). In this paper, I want to complicate these arguments by considering the different ways that cult stars are promoted based on their ‘non-cult’ acting ‘credentials’, authenticity and status as a ‘cult’ star in their own right, through the examples of two TV stars from the now globally successful cult TV show *Doctor Who (2005-)*. In doing so, I want to suggest that in the case of *Doctor Who*, the desire by the BBC and its producers to make a ‘cult’ TV text mainstream, through promotional paratexts and their connections to the main TV text, means actors exist in cult TV texts in multiple ways, drawing on their previous ‘cult’ characters, other acting credentials and their TV personalities. Through promotional paratexts, and their connections to the core TV text, I suggest that TV stardom is a key part of tense dialectics that help make some cult TV, mainstream. I want to start by considering the paratext, its role in relation to the central TV text, and my argument that cult TV texts are so dependent on paratexts, that it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the two in an analysis of what makes cult TV, cult.

**Paratexts and cult TV: the final frontier**

Potentially, the TV industry promotes cult TV more than any other form of TV. This is perhaps not surprising, when we think about the valuable cult audience that TV channels and production companies want to attract. A core set of viewers that develop an intense relationship with the text; they want to know more and more, watch more and more and are likely to buy more and more, in relation to a cult text. Not only must the cult TV text itself engage, with well-furnished ever-expanding universes, complex characters, unusual storylines and hybrid genres, it must live beyond the ‘event’ of the cult TV episode, to satisfy both the cult fan’s appetite and draw them in to boost ratings. To do this, TV companies promote, spin and hype cult TV through various pre, post and parallel materials or paratexts. Genette (1997) first used the word paratexts from a literary point of view to refer to the ‘accessories’ in a book, including the preface, illustrations or title of the book. He defines these not as boundaries, but as transitional spaces or thresholds between the ‘text’ and ‘off text’. In televisual terms, we can define paratexts as the vast array of extra-textual materials generated in relation to a TV show, from toys to books, trailers before the launch of a new series or episode, press releases to the media, materials posted to the web and social media, interviews with the cast of the series in the reporting media and reviews of new episodes. For Genette, in literary terms, paratexts are strategic spaces of intent, designed to prepare the reader for what is to come or to help or guide the reader with the main text. Indeed, Matt Hills has noted, the same can be said for TV promotional paratexts: ‘Paratexts represent a way for producers and marketing *(and PR)* professionals to frame texts, setting up audience expectations and putting interpretation frameworks in place’ (2014: 184) (my addition in italics). In fact, in the highly competitive world of digital, satellite and catch up, an increasingly fragmented TV landscape means the success or failure of a TV series can be dependent on the performance of a trailer or set of paratexts, prior to the premier of a TV series or episode. The significance of this is noticeable when we consider the amounts invested by TV companies in paratexts. ABC, the original production company for the cult TV series *Lost* (2004-2010), heavily funded in its own promotional campaign for the series; nevertheless, Channel 4 still chose to spend £1 million on promotion when it aired in the UK. Paul Grainge (2009) has noted, this amount was only second in spend terms, to the launch of Channel 4’s entire new channel, *More4*.

Despite the obvious large-scale investment in promotional texts for cult TV series, compared to the dearth of cult TV textual analyses[[1]](#footnote-1), academics have tended to ignore promotional paratexts from their readings. They often position paratexts as secondary to the main and ‘legitimate’ text and associate them with ‘hype’; their meanings skewed by commercialism and over-reliant on stereotypes. Yet, if we take trailers for cult TV, these have become texts with large-scale audiences in their own right. Take my case study for this paper, *Doctor Who*. The BBC revived the series in 2005, after a 15-year hiatus from British TV screens. The narrative follows the tales of a traveller across time and space; he has the capability to regenerate his body and has done so now thirteen[[2]](#footnote-2) times, giving the programme capacity for renewal and regeneration not enjoyed by many cult sci-fi series. The first trailer for season nine of the seriesreceived over 2 million views on Youtube alone(Doctor Who Series 9 Trailer, July 9th, 2015). That equates to a quarter of the recent average weekly audience figures for an episode of the core *Doctor Who* text reported to be 7 million in 2014 (‘Doctor Who Ratings are Awful’, October 7th, 2015). As Matt Hills (2014) has noted, paratexts can carry significant weight as part of a cult texts’ wider life with an audience. Meanings about a TV series seep from these pre-episodic clips, reviews, posters and merchandise into our overall understanding of a series. Given their importance to TV companies, and the scrutiny that fans place upon these extra-textual offerings, setting up frameworks of interpretation for the show itself, it is hard not to argue that the boundaries between where the main text begins, and the paratext ends, are at least becoming more porous. Good examples, textually, are the prequel webisodes to the 50th anniversary episode of *Doctor Who*. The BBC heavily marketed the anniversary episode as ‘event TV’, airing it simultaneously in many cinema screens across the UK, alongside its TV debut. Prior to the airing of the anniversary episode ‘Day of the Doctor*’* (23 November 2013), two prequels were developed and released online, both of which hinted at aspects of the anniversary episode, giving clues about what was to come. One prequel in particular entitled *‘*Night of the Doctor*’* contained information of greater importance about the narrative of the anniversary episode, but also to the overall diegesis of *Doctor Who*. This prequel paratext, told the story of the regeneration of the eighth Doctor into the war Doctor; a version of the Doctor that existed between Christopher Eccleston’s ninth Doctor and Paul McGann’s eighth Doctor. As an audience, we only became aware that this version of the Doctor existed in the season finale, prior to the anniversary episode. The star of this webisode, the eighth Doctor, played my Paul McGann, appeared only once previously, as the Doctor on TV in the one-off 1996 *Doctor Who* film and this regeneration was a previously untold part of his story. In this way, this *Doctor Who* paratext is a primer for the TV event, but it is also a text in its right, adding a new narrative to the overall *Doctor Who* universe. A paratext that therefore stands alone and is vital to cult fans with their thirst for an understanding of the larger *Doctor Who* narrative. Indeed, as Matt Hills has highlighted, overall, TV channels do not give trailers authorial status (2014: 191), however, Steven Moffatt, the show’s executive producer of the time, is credited as writer of this paratext, giving it added gravitas. In the case of cult TV, paratexts have become almost inseparable from their core texts.

There are a range of types of paratexts in relation to a TV series generated prior to, during and after the main TV text airs. Central to my argument that paratexts are inextricably linked to cult TV texts, is the notion that they frame cult TV texts as part of an audience desire for intense engagement. Also, I am interested in the initial period of a TV star’s life in a cult series such as *Doctor Who,* to consider how their stardom is implicated in the early promotional phase. Thus, in this essay, I will focus upon material that TV companies’ generate prior to the launch of a new series or episode. Matt Hills has referred to these as ‘prior paratexts’ (2014: 184). These include press releases, interviews with the stars of new series, online and press advertising and TV/cinema trailers. Although, I will touch on how the core TV text relates to a star’s positioning in ‘prior paratexts’. In order to trace the various ways TV stars are commodified in the development and maintenance of *Doctor Who* as mainstream cult TV, I am going to examine two case studies which bring to light different facets of a TV star’s persona that are drawn into the packaging of their appearance in a new episode or series. The first takes us back to 2005, the beginning of the new relaunched series and the stardom of Christopher Eccleston, who the BBC entrusted to bring a classic cult TV series back to our screens. Latterly, I consider the more recent stardom of Maisie Williams, who brought different elements of her fame and personality to the series but with a similar ratings rejuvenation goal for the BBC.

**Medicine for a new Doctor: authenticity and ‘serious’ stardom**

The BBC had its work cut out in 2005, when it decided to bring *Doctor Who* back to its primetime BBC1 early Saturday evening slot. The pressure was on for the production team to prove that the new *Doctor Who* still had the power to hold Saturday evening ratings. The TV landscape had changed dramatically since the show was last on air in 1989, with the availability of multiple channels (there were only four terrestrial channels available in the UK when *Doctor Who* went off air) across digital, cable and satellite networks; new strategies in TV production and promotion had emerged to generate smaller but solid niche audiences. The strategic development of cult TV that could attract invested, dedicated and extra textual ‘spend-likely’ fans was one of these new approaches. However, in this case, the BBC faced similar challenges to the last time the series aired. It did not have to please advertisers by attracting audiences with particular demographics; a marketing strategy that cult TV helped to deliver for commercial stations. Instead, with its continuing commitment to make all round family entertainment for its license paying viewers, it still needed to bring disparate audiences back together for larger-scale family viewing on a Saturday evening. It had to do so against its main rival ITV. That rival, at the time in 2005, had been highly successful with its early evening entertainment series *Ant and Dec’s Saturday Night Takeaway* (2002–). The series was a long running ratings winner for ITV, featuring two popular British comedians in a slot that advertisers highlight was popular with lower socio-economic groups (Advertising on ITV, 2016). The challenge facing the BBC was how to recreate a cult series bringing back original fans, while keeping the series relevant and broad enough to draw a range of viewers, young and old, into the new series, to make it a Saturday night family viewing hit.

The strategy adopted by the BBC was to foreground elements of the new series that would appeal to wider audiences, beyond those who liked the original series or were science fiction fans. The stardom of Christopher Eccleston was to feature heavily in the promotion of the new series to help deliver this strategy. As highlighted by my title for this paper, the BBC flagged the significance of Eccleston’s presence in the *Doctor Who* text in the main trailer for the new series where Eccleston asks the audience: ‘Do you wanna come with me? While on one level, for those who knew the character of the Doctor this would be asking whether we are ready to go on a new adventure with him; for those that did not know the previous *Doctor Who*, many of us are being asked if we want to embark on a journey with the actor Eccleston. The BBC’s strategy of blurring the boundaries between Eccleston and the new Doctor is all the more obvious when we compare it to the previous failed attempt to bring the Doctor back. In the one-off film released in 1996, *Doctor Who: The Movie*, a joint production between the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the BBC, the tagline for the trailer for the new film was ‘He’s back and it’s about time’. There, the focus was on the cult character, rather than the actor.

The connotations of Eccleston’s own stardom and his ‘presence’ in the *Doctor Who* text as ‘himself’ went beyond polysemic suggestions in the promotional trailer. Eccleston was allowed to keep his own Salford accent, creating the greatest distance yet in *Doctor Who*’s history from the dominance of Standard English Received Pronunciation (RP). RP, often also called ‘BBC English’, is associated with, and constructed from, accents in the Southeast of England, and is still referred to as a ‘posh’ accent (Fabricius, 2002: 117). Although the actor, who played the seventh Doctor, Sylvester McCoy, did speak with his Scots accent, he spoke with rolling Rs and used distinct Ts still fitting with RP. Paul McGann who briefly played the eighth Doctor for the one-off film spoke with an Americanised accent, but his companion helped to ground the Doctor back to his associations with ideas of ‘poshness’ by suggesting that the Doctor’s eccentricity was related to his Britishness, evoking an idea of the British upper classes. Indeed, since Eccleston’s departure from the series, he has made it public that when he started to play the role of the Doctor, he insisted on keeping his Northern accent to avoid associations of RP with intellect and to honour his working class roots (‘Christopher Eccleston on Doctor Who…’ 14th April 2015). In this way, his authenticity as an actor, his own personal stardom, was a key part of the newly regenerated Doctor, allowing the Doctor in promotional paratexts to be part Eccleston, part cult character. Russell T. Davies, the series showrunner at the time, and the BBC, needed Eccleston’s stardom to generate mainstream audiences, making his stardom integral to the revival of cult, and therefore giving him more personal power in its development. While this gave Eccleston power, arguably it was also a useful promotional tool for the BBC. The BBC foregrounded this authenticity ahead of the relaunch, in material from the BBC press office, quoting Eccleston saying, ‘the accent is an interesting thing … The Doctor is a scientist and an intellectual and a lot of people seem to think you can only be those things if you speak with Received Pronunciation which, of course, is rubbish’ (‘Doctor Who Press Pack, Phase One’, 10th March, 2005). This verisimilitude was useful to the BBC and reminds us that in television, the authenticity of an actor has always been more important than in film. As a domestic medium, even with the advent of laptop and mobile viewing, TV is more personal than cinema, beaming or being wired straight into our bedrooms and living rooms. Thus, TV makes us more comfortable with those that closely inhabit our private spaces. There is, however, a tension in that existence. Unlike film, where it is rare that a film star will play a character more than a few times, in TV we will have six to 12 hours of getting to know that character, even in a short run drama. Moreover, as Ellis notes, the TV star is traditionally more tightly bound to the role through ancillary discourse circulating in the media while they appear in a TV series:

‘The television performer appears regularly for a series which itself is constituted on the basis of the reception of a particular character and/or situation. The television performer appears in subsidiary forms of circulation (newspapers/magazines) mostly during the time that the series of performances is being broadcast. The result is a drastic reduction in the distance between the circulated image and the performance. The two become very much entangled, so that the performers’ image is equated with that of the fictional role (and vice versa)’ (1992: 106).

So in TV, in general, there is an osmotic effect of the TV character on to the star. We know we will take a TV star for granted once they become synonymous with the character in the serial, but the domestic nature of TV means we need to be comfortable them first. Ellis’ (1992) theorised that this regularity of appearances that TV stars make as their characters, means TV stardom is impossible. He argues that TV stars are transmitted (or communicated about) more as their characters than as themselves, whereas the reverse is true for film stars, who enjoy more or less continuous media coverage of their stardom, but their characters will be varied and have limited time ‘on-screen’. However, and to return to the case of Christopher Eccleston and *Doctor Who*, to dichotimise TV and film this way, to suggest that stardom is impossible for TV stars, is to reduce and over-simplify the overlapping and complex organisation of the film and TV industries. Eccleston was already becoming an established film star when joining *Doctor Who.* Indeed, arguably he brought with him cult associations through his appearance in the British made film *Shallow Grave* (1994). He is both a TV, and a film star, therefore appearances ‘off-screen’ and discourses about his stardom are probably greater and therefore more balanced with his time ‘on-screen’. Indeed, as Bennett (2010) notes, we should acknowledge TV stardom in its own right, rather than as unable to ‘live-up’ to that of film stardom, creating a hierarchy where film stardom is superior to TV stardom. Moreover, the interplay between the film and TV industries and the much expanded online and media space for discussion about TV and film celebrity, means that TV stars can be hyped as much as, if not more than film stars, although that hype might well focus on authenticity, as was partly the case for Eccleston and the re-launch of *Doctor Who*.

The BBC and the production team of *Doctor Who* also used aspects of Eccleston’s acting heritage, to draw in audiences that might not necessarily have taken Doctor Who seriously in the past, or might be uncertain about the potential of a new actor playing the Doctor. The first paragraph of the first press release about the new series from the BBC opens with the line, ‘Acclaimed actor Christopher Eccleston plays Doctor Who’ (Doctor Who Press Pack, Phase One, Acclaimed…’ (10th March, 2005). Here, the BBC invokes Christopher Eccelston’s serious acting credentials based in his acting past in film and serious TV dramas. As I have mentioned, Eccleston was already a film star in the making, through his appearances in the film *Shallow Grave* and later in his first larger film role in *The Others (2001)* a Spanish/Hollywood collaboration, alongside Nicole Kidman. Televisually, Eccleston was perhaps most famous for his roles as DCI David Billborough in the hit ITV police psychologist series, *Cracker* (1993-1994) but also for other roles as Nicky Hutchinson in the BBC’s *Our Friends in the North* (1996) and then more latterly in the tale of a modern day Jesus in *The Second Coming* (2003). Indeed, Eccleston’s appearance in The *Second* Coming connected him to Russell T. Davies, the executive producer of the series who would go on to become the executive producer of the new *Doctor who* . This brought with it other connotations, in terms of its relations to the authorial stardom of Russell T. Davies who was perhaps most famous for his groundbreaking Channel 4 drama series *Queer as Folk* (UK 1999–2000), which frankly depicted Manchester’s gay male subculture. He also wrote a number of other successful drama series, including *Bob and Rose* (2001) and *Casanova* (2005). As Eccleston’s next TV project after The *Second Coming*, in effect, by casting Eccleston, Davies was offering the British public the next instalment of Davies/Eccleston brand of TV drama, as well as opening up the series to fans of Eccleston’s other work, in TV and film drama. In this way, the BBC foregrounded Eccleston’s stardom to help make a cult series a mainstream hit, and in doing so they reinvigorated and regenerated a cult TV character. The star helped make the cult character, and arguably through launch promotions, was bigger than the cult character. Of course, in the case of Eccleston, he departed the series after only one season, perhaps suggesting that Gwenllian-Jones’ theorisation that a TV star cannot be bigger than their cult character, in the end, is correct. However, in my second case I want to consider another TV star, Maisie Williams who more recently appeared in *Doctor Who*, and the promotional hype that surrounded her debut in the series. Although not a permanent member of the cast, her stardom is arguably bigger than her character, and was commodified in different ways to Eccleston’s through her cult TV associations, serving the BBC’s needs to reinvigorate *Doctor Who* once more.

**The star of Westeros: Maisie Williams (and the cult of Game of Thrones) in *Doctor Who***

In televisual terms, Maisie Williams is a relatively new, bright shining star. Shooting to fame via the cult, and globally successful fantasy series *Game of Thrones* (2011)(GOT), she received critical acclaim for her performance in the series(‘Game of Thrones, Episode 8…’, 6th June 2011) and is fast becoming a household name. By the time Williams was heralded as the latest star to join the new *Doctor Who* for its ninth series, she was already famous beyond GOT*,* including her first large-scale, albeit British film role, in the mystery drama film *The Falling* (2014). She had also appeared in other British TV drama including the one-off Channel 4 film *Cyberbully* (2014).

When the BBC announced Maisie Williams would join the series, it was again facing difficult times with *Doctor Who*. There was pressure on the current showrunner, Steven Moffat, to get the series back to the audience ratings enjoyed when it first came back British TV screens in 2005 (regularly now below 7 million after its highs of 9-10 million in the first two seasons (Doctor Who Guide, nd). The Doctor, now regenerated into his 13th incarnation[[3]](#footnote-3), played by Peter Capaldi, was not as popular as his predecessors, and alongside the writing of the series received a number of mixed media reviews (Doctor Who: Seven reasons the twelth Doctor actually sucks, nd). There was a need to bring in new viewers, and re-engage those who had previously enjoyed the revival of the cult series.

The BBC’s strategy was partly to heavily promote the arrival of Williams through pre-series media promotion and TV trailers. In a launch press release posted to the BBC’s *Doctor Who* fan site (Game of Thrones Star…’, 30th March 2015), Williams is introduced to fans in the headline of the news release as ‘Game of Thrones Star’, thus invoking her credentials as a TV star from the hit cult fantasy TV series. However, once into the main body of the paratext, Williams is introduced as herself and a number of aspects of her stardom both in terms of acting credits and aspects of her personality are drawn upon. The press release highlights that any information about the new character Ashildir, that Maisie will eventually play, is currently secret. Therefore in this press release, and in the *Doctor Who* universe prior to the episode ‘The girl who died’ (2005) where we meet Maisie’s character, Maisie enters the *Doctor Who* universe has herself. The press release also informs us that she has other serious acting credits through her role in the TV film *Cyberbully* and also in her casting for a new film *The Fallen*, thus drawing on her wider stardom to give added credibility to the flagging series*.* In the same way, that Eccleston was introduced to the *Doctor Who* universe, we are also given a glimpse of Maisie’s own personal life and personality: firstly, by a reference to the shooting of the series taking place near her home town; and secondly by a comment from Steven Moffat about William’s role in the new series. He suggests that that ‘Maisie will give him hell’ conjuring notions that she will be a feisty, challenging companion to the Doctor. Just as Eccleston’s question to viewers, ‘Do you want to come with me?’ was polysemic; Maisie giving the Doctor hell can also be read in at least two ways. Firstly, we could interpret this based on her character from GOT – Arya Stark. In GOT, she plays a young girl who loses much of her family early on in the overall six season diegesis and has to learn subterfuge and fighting skills to survive, fighting tooth and nail to stay alive and make her way in the GOT world. In one long-running narrative in the series, she is cared for begrudgingly by Sandor Clegane, a rough, hardened warrior who deserted his post working for the current King of the seven kingdoms. Their dynamic is portrayed as one driven by their mutual dislike coupled with emotional or safety needs for each other. A good summary of Arya’s approach to Sandor would be that she ‘gives him hell’, despite his honourable if somewhat reluctant intentions towards looking after her, following the killing of both her parents. Secondly, we could decode ‘giving him hell’ as also representing Williams herself. In a number of TV and online interviews, Maisie Williams and her publicists position her as a feminist. For example, in a TV interview at the premier of *The Falling,* she talks about the imbalance between the expectations put upon young women versus young men, in relation to sex (‘Maisie Williams Interview…’ 29th April 2015). She challenges men and ‘gives hell’ in publicity terms, as well. In this way, there is a blurring between her and her GOT character Arya Stark; an overlap between her on-screen character and her own persona. This means she can represent herself as ‘giving hell’ generating her own publicity, but that also enables the BBC to commodify her stardom and cult credentials as Maisie Williams, the star entering *Doctor Who*, at least partly also as the cult character Arya Stark. Indeed, different elements of William’s stardom are foregrounded to fulfil various needs of the cult mainstream TV audience. As Bennett (2010) has theorised of TV stars, her authenticity and personality are important so we can get to know her and welcome her into our homes combined with her cult TV credentials for the cult fantasy fans and wider TV and film drama experience for those wanting a serious drama actor. Austin (2002) first, in relation to Film and then later Hills (2008) in relation to TV, have both used the phrase ‘dispersible moments’; the idea that film and TV is made up of segments or themes designed to appeal to, be promoted to and draw in, different niche audiences. For example, the Cowboy trope and vast vistas and landscapes of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), coupled with the romantic story of two closeted queer cowboys, could be said to ensure there is something for the men accompanying their female partners to see the film. In a similar fashion, Maisie Williams serves as a ‘dispersible star’; shaped in the paratextual universe to draw in various audiences.

Not only is Maisie a ‘dispersible’ star, with beams of her fame sent out in different directions by the BBC to collect new audiences and revitalise old ones, the BBC’s strategy also feeds into other facets that we can see as emblematic of cult TV. As Gwenllian Jones notes, ‘Cult television series draw attention to the fact that ‘there is no there there’. There is a deficit between what is (or can be) shown and what the avid audience wants to see, explore develop and know; storylines and sub-plots extend far beyond the diegesis; events imply unshown possible histories and futures; many possible motivations and responses remain unstated. It is this deficit between what is presented on screen and what is implied or omitted that cult television formats exploit in order to enthral viewers.’ (2010: 13) The Williams press release uses various aspects of stardom to feed the cult audience needs that Gwenllian-Jones refers to here. It implies ‘unshown possible histories and futures’: What will it be like to see Williams in *Doctor Who*? The press release suggests her new character is a secret, but hints that there will be something of Williams and/or her cult character Arya, in the new *Doctor Who* character. We are left wondering how that will manifest itself, how far will the BBC go? A tease, but one filled with the mystery and never-ending storytelling that Gwenllian Jones suggests is associated with cult TV. The paratextual positioning of Williams, invites the potential audience into complex acts of interpretation of the new character; here, her star is a sign with a polyvalence of possible meanings that are left open. As Gwenllian Jones notes of Cult TV drawing on the works of Eco: ‘Its evocative fantasy-scape works with its textual ‘ricketness’ (Eco, 1987: 198) innumerable intertextual references, and self-reflexivity, to produce a dynamic text-reader relationship of the sort that Eco elsewhere describes as a ‘dialectic between openness and form, initiative on the part the interpreter and contextual pressure’ (2000, 21). This same dialectical relationship is at play in relation to Williams’ introduction into *Doctor Who*. The form of her previous character and stardom, works dialectically with the openness and possibilities that the audience imagines of her playing the new character.

Moffat, the showrunner and writer for Williams’ episodes, maintained the uncertainty about whether Williams is playing her new character Ashildir or some of Arya, into the *Doctor Who* text itself. This then fed speculation, uncertainty and the ‘initiative of the interpreter’ through the reporting media. For example, the setting for the introduction of Ashildir into *Doctor Who* is a Viking settlement, placing her in a time-period around the 11th century. Although there is some meddling with our expectations of the universe in GOT, through the inclusion of the zombie beings known as the White Walkers, black magic and the unfamiliar geography, GOT seems to be set in something similar to our late middle ages. The long sword as weapon of choice signifies this, the architecture is consistent with the time including curtain walled castles and the fashion is also reminiscent of the period. Ashildir therefore doesn’t quite come from the same period as Arya in GOT, but we could probably locate her in the early middle ages therefore the settings and costumes are much closer to her GOT origins, than if the Doctor met her in current day Britain. Moreover, the character of Ashildir has striking resemblances to the character of Arya Stark in GOT. Ashildir is androgynous, and states herself that ‘all my life I have been different; the girls all thought I was a boy.’ Thus, intertextually, mirroring a storyline from GOT where for most of season three Arya Stark must maintain cover as a boy. These similarities did not go unnoticed by the reporting media, with the Mail Online highlighting that Williams would feel comfortable in her new *Doctor Who* fantasy folklore setting (‘Friend or foe…’, 17th October, 2015). In this way, Maisie Williams was a vehicle for the genre blending we expect of cult TV; a GOT-like setting mashed up with *Doctor Who*. Maisie Willaims bought aspects of the feisty Arya Stark, her own locally grounded stardom and cult TV credentials. Her character has form in the narrative through our generic expectations of *Doctor Who* and the fantasy setting of Viking times, but various elements of her TV and film past are put to play in the promotional universe, to leave her character open to interpretation. The cult dialectic of openness, versus form, swings back and forth.

This openness works across paratexts, into the text, and through BBC generated publicity into the reporting media. It creates a story that intertwines stardom, cult intertextuality and *Doctor Who* narrative. This intersection of narrative and wider extra-diegetic storytelling, makes it increasingly difficult to know where the narrative ends, and the stories of stardom and cult TV gossip begin. For example, in the Mail article above there is further play with expectations, through the speculation that Maisie William’s delivery of the character Ashildir puts her in line for a more permanent role to become the Doctor’s new companion. This speculation is possible because we as the audience already know that Clara, the current companion, leaves the Doctor; a fate that at the point of Williams joining the series is public, although we do not know how or when. Moffat’s inclusion of such a stand out character, played by such a well-known TV actress, was arguably good strategic timing. Moffat would soon be losing a companion liked by the public, against a backdrop of a Doctor that has received a mixed reception and lower ratings than his predecessors have. In doing so, the ‘form’ that the Doctor will have a new companion continues, the ‘openness’ about who that is remains intact; through stardom and publicity, Moffat and the BBC powered the dialectic between openness and form to keep the cult audience on the edge, interested and engaged.

**Conclusion**

John Barrowman is an actor known for his role as Captain Jack Harkness in *Doctor Who* and the cult science-fiction series *Torchwood (2006-),* but also as a Saturday night TV presenter. In Rebecca Williams’ (2013) analysis of his stardom she notes that unlike many cult TV stars, Barrowman has been able to operate multiple TV identities. She highlights that that while rare in his intersectionality, he is able to establish quite different personas in the various genres he works in, including entertainment TV, cult science fiction TV and as a local celebrity, making regular appearances in South Wales. In doing so, he transcends and challenges established binaries in celebrity studies of fact/fiction, ordinary/extraordinary and cult/mainstream. Through the two case studies of Christopher Eccleston and Maisie Williams and their stardoms, in relation to the hype and packaging of their forthcoming appearances and then ‘textual life’ as cult characters, I have argued that their stardom also challenges established binaries in celebrity and cult TV studies. They both transcend a false binary of film or TV star, complicating notions that TV stardom is impossible (Ellis, 1992), where they enjoy extensive exposure as film and TV stars, therefore tipping the scales of ordinariness (on screen) versus extraordinariness (through extended celebrity exposure) that Ellis suggested keeps film stars with their extended star coverage, distinct from TV stars. However, paradoxically, they also have to be made personable and ordinary through publicity; in order for us to feel comfortable with them occupying our favourite cult characters on our screens, as they are regularly beamed and wired into our safe domestic spaces. An extraordinary ordinariness, that, like Barrowman, helps both Eccleston and Williams operate multiple identities as film stars, TV stars and cult characters. It is these multiple stardoms that are variously commodified, to help make the cult TV of *Doctor Who,* mainstream.

In both Eccleston and William’s cases, their cult characters certainly loom large. Eccleston still gives interviews about his time as the Doctor, while Williams was only ever a *Doctor Who* guest star but is once again known mainly for her role as Arya Stark in GOT. In both cases, however, the lines between their cult characters and their own stardoms are blurred. Through their stardoms they brought different things to *Doctor Who*, Eccleston his associations to the new showrunner, and a serious drama heritage to breathe new life into the cult character of *Doctor Who*; Williams literally brought aspects of the cult fantasy series she was famous for, into the series. In the realms of the pre-launch and pre-episodic paratext, in different ways their stardoms were integral to the success of the creation and maintenance of their mainstream cult characters, complicating arguments that the actor is only a vessel for the cult character. As it becomes increasingly difficult to justify the binaries we have defended around the borders between the ‘legitimate’ TV text, and the lowbrow and hype orientated paratext, so too do we find it hard to separate the creation of the successful cult character with the commodification of aspects of the actor’s stardom. Their stardoms are engines in two dialectics of cult TV; cult versus mainstream and narrative form versus openness. By helping to maintain the tensions between these two positions through promotional paratexts and the TV text, the star is kept burning and the cult character prevented from dominating; the star commodified for long enough that audience expectation can be built. While these cases challenge notions of cult characters as larger than their respective actors, at least in the paratextual sphere of *Doctor Who*, their stardoms are part and parcel of creating complex interpretive practices that have come to characterise, and define, cult TV.

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1. For example, see Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson’s volume on Cult TV (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. If we count John Hurt and his character ‘The War Doctor’ who was inserted between the Doctor’s eighth and ninth regeneration. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. If we include the new regeneration of the war doctor that has been inserted into the Doctor’s timeline. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)