**Steed as a drag queen and the asexual Number Six: notes on cult tele-fantasy’s queer roots**

This short intervention will reflect upon the significance of non-normative gender and sexuality[[1]](#footnote-1) as part of the logics of industrialised cult tele-fantasy that we recognise today. Sara Gwenllian-Jones (2002), in seminal her work on 1990s cult tele-fantasy, observes that it had a potential sub-textual queerness. She suggests slash fiction writers who imagined the erotic encounters of same sex characters – most famously *Star Trek’s* (NBC, 1966-1969) Spock/Kirk – were not subverting the text but extending what was already there. Gwenllian-Jones argues that cult tele-fantasy’s interest in the fantastic means that the logic of the narrative works against the everyday; heterosexuality as the dominant and mainstream form of sexual identity does not fit with cult TV’s inherent form. Compounding this, Gwenllian-Jones uses the example of the resistance by most cult tele-fantasy writers to allow leading heterosexual characters to form long-term relationships, and their preference instead for less important characters to form relationships, or for the foregrounding of same sex friendships. *The* *X-Files’* (1993-) Mulder and Scully are good examples of a couple never allowed to settle into a long-term relationship, despite their ongoing ‘will they, won’t they’ romance (until now, as the latest season cliff-hanger in their on/off romance would lead us to believe). While Gwenllian-Jones’ argument about the inherently offbeat, thus non-normative, nature of cult tele-fantasy holds, in this piece I would like to begin to examine whether the significance of non-normative gender and sexuality as a dominant generic convention of cult tele-fantasy as a ‘meta-genre’ (Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson, 2004: xvi) has to date, been under-recognised. To this end, I will revisit *The Avengers (ITV, 1961-1969)* and *The Prisoner (ITV, 1967-1968),* two TV texts often cited as important, early examples of cult tele-fantasy , and as foundational to the development of later more self-conscious cult TV such as *Twin Peaks (ABC,* 1990-2017 )(Short, 2011; Pearson and Jones, 2004; Chapman; 2009). I focus on three common narrative features of these texts – deconstruction of masculinity, camp and identity fracture– which I will argue highlight cult tele-fantasy’s queer leanings, going back to the beginnings of academic-canon cult tele-fantasy.

**Deconstructed masculinities and camp vistas**

In their own distinct ways, both *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner* challenged normative masculinities of the 1960s. *The Avengers* started out as a straight spy series but by its third series it had developed into a very different show, one that played with the generic conventions of the traditional espionage format, gradually blending it with comedy and science fiction. Indeed, beyond generic hybridity, there are several aspects that made it ‘cultish’ TV at the time, and I want to suggest that these were foundational, both to future industrial models of cult TV, and to the inherent queerness of that model. Academics have discussed its gender politics - the importance of Dr Cathy Gale (Honor Blackman), then Emma Peel (Diana Rigg) and to a lesser extent Tara King (Linda Thorson), as the earliest examples of female TV crime fighting action heroes (Chapman, 2009 and Short, 2011). Steed’s (Patrick McNee) foppish, dandy masculinity and its feminine attributes have also been discussed (Chapman, 2009) but my focus here is how Steed’s masculinity changed across the series and its relationship with pop camp.

*The Avengers* itself started out as a series drenched in masculinity with two male leads (Patrick McNee as Steed and Ian Hendry as Dr David Keel) who - although ostensibly not private eyes - aped the iconography of the troubled hard-nosed private eye that had been fashionable since Humphrey Bogart played Phillip Marlow in *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) (Chapman, 2009: 59). These darker more masculine early episodes were very different from those in its last four series. Shot in technicolour, *The Avengers* became a celebration of modern London pop culture parading the garish and bold interior design of the swinging sixties through the show’s regular starting point of Steed, Dr Gale, Mrs Peel or Miss King’s homes. It was also not frightened to play with Steed’s masculinity, transforming him over a number of series from the trench-coat-wearing moody agent he originally played, into a champagne-sipping, fashion- conscious dandy. While this firmly placed Steed within a discourse of masculinity acceptable at that time, it is one closely associated with the feminine through style and the assumption that a wealthy background means a softer more domesticated lifestyle. In this way, and to be crude in gendered terms, the show literally shifted its centre of gravity from masculinity to femininity, from hard-nosed seedy storylines centred on the criminal underworld featuring macho detectives to enigmatic, mysterious fantasy-orientated narratives played out in a diegesis steeped with frivolity. The series’ play with gender was just one aspect of its transformation into a celebration of camp; parody and irony became two of its central tenets, turning on the shows interest in murderous megalomaniacs or new technologies of horror twinned with fashion, style and throwaway puns.

While *The Avenger’s* camp was not overtly associated with queer politics, Moe Meyer has noted that this version of camp – a ‘pop camp’ – is the:

‘unwitting vehicle of a subversive operation that introduces queer signifying codes into a dominant discourse’. He continues ‘its final effect is the reproduction of the queer’s aura by the un-queer camp liberator who has been transformed into a drag queen with no other choice but to lip-synch the discourse of the other’ (1994: 13).

Over the period of the series, the show’s creators slowly transformed Steed into this ‘drag queen’. While always maintaining a version of acceptable masculinity, Steed became a knowing part of the camp antics of the series. Across its six seasons it showed Steed’s masculinity to be fluid, an important shift at a time when notions of masculinity were more limited and fixed.

*The Prisoner* played with masculinity against a pop camp backdrop too, but in different ways. The series follows the story of a spy who resigns but is then taken by unknown captors and held in ‘The Village’, a seemingly idyllic location from which he can’t escape. Interpretations of Patrick McGoohan’s cult spy-fi series*,* range from suggestions that it is an allegory for McGoohan’s own dilemma as an actor trapped by his previous role as John Drake in *Danger Man (ITV, 1960-1968),* to the protagonist Number Six representing homosexuality, in relation to Number 6’s distant, and even mildly misogynistic approach, to women (Short, 2011: 24). On this last point, and starting to think about the series from a queer perspective, this is one of the only readings of the series that foregrounds the work the show did to lay the ground for future cult tele-fantasy which would eventually play with gendered sexual identity in a much more overt way. While Steed’s foppish and dandy masculinity allowed him to take part in the high-camp of *The Avengers*, Patrick McGoohan’s Number Six, represented another version of masculinity in his reaction to his new found surroundings of the campy neo-baroque, but much darker surroundings of The Village. While Steed’s masculinity became playful with camp, Number Six was lost and vulnerable in his new surrounds, emblematic of a masculinity beginning to question itself against the cultural backdrop of changing expectations for men. Number Six’s masculinity is less overtly queer in that sense, but still an important break from the traditional models of hegemonic masculinity of the time. This shift is made more obvious if we read McGoohan’s Number Six, against his previous role as John Drake in *Danger Man*. In Danger Man, McGoohan plays a more conventional spy hero, certain of his place and role as a spy for NATO, then for a British spy organisation M9. Moreover, John Drake had some limited romantic encounters, while Number Six lacked a specific sexual identity; despite advances towards him he never engages in any romantic or sexual activity in the series - for all purposes he is asexual. Of course, narratively we can read this as part of his distrust for anyone in The Village - a safety measure. Nevertheless, even as a side-effect, these aspects of Number Two’s masculinity are certainly queer representations of both gender and sexuality, in a wider TV and film landscape where leading action men needed to be seen as taking control and proving their romantic hetero-masculinity.

**Identity fracture**

The fluidity of masculinity foregrounded in different ways by *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner,* highlights that both series challenged notions of fixed gender identity, well before queer theorists were highlighting its importance to gender and sexual politics in the late 1980s (Butler, 1990).In the case of *The Prisoner,*beyond masculinity, questions of identity dominate the series, mostly through the perspective of Number Six and his self-reflexive exploration of his loss of identity and his fight to regain his previous persona. Identity here is fractured; imagined as a blank canvas that antagonist Number Two believes he can shape in order that Number Six and the other ‘retired’ spies, can live out their remaining lives in ‘useful peace’.

Questions of identity dominated *The Avengers* too. While the beginnings of the series were a little more explicit about the motives of Dr Ian Hendry, seeking to avenge the death of his fiancée, even the introduction of Steed at this point is shrouded in mystery. As an audience we never find out much more about Steed’s background or of his spy partners across the series six seasons. When we do, the series fetishizes those moments. For example, when Emma Peel leaves Steed for the last time at the end of season 5, she is driven away by a man we assume to be her partner, whom, in the show’s characteristically ironic way is wearing a similar suit, bowler hat and umbrella to that of Steed’s iconic costume. Identity in *The Avengers* is something that can be played with, and in part it allows the ground-breaking crime-fighting female representations and pop camp masculinities to be just that, free from the tethering’s of romantic relationships, which would restore domestic heteronormative models of gender of that time.

Both series’ obsession with identity play can of course be seen as emblematic of the late 1960s. A period of significant cultural shifts where identity politics were on the ascent, following the US civil rights movement and its wins around equality in the workplace in racial and gender terms through the civil rights act 1964. A renewed feminism, now referred to as its second wave, began in the US in this period and spread to other Western countries. In the UK, in 1967 the Government made homosexuality legal for those over 21, arguably the moment that marks the beginning of a slow but progressive liberalisation of law around alternative sexual and gender identities. Neither *The Avengers,* nor *The Prisoner, were* leading lights in racial representation, given their mostly white casts. However, both series questioning of the stability of social identity, mirrored the moment when it became a more widely understood, yet simultaneously problematised construct.

**Conclusion**

With *Sense8’s* *(Netflix, 2015-2018)* reasonably quick demise, excitement about the possibility that VOD, with its subscription-driven model, can challenge LGBTQ boundaries with less fear of advertisers has perhaps been overstated. Nevertheless, we need to recognise the progress we have seen against the backdrop of a cult tele-fantasy past where LGBTQ characters were conspicuous in their absence. Despite the past dearth of representations, the relationship between the LGBTQ community and cult tele-fantasy has always been a close one. The London Pride festival’s 2007 decision to show the *Doctor Who* finale in Trafalgar Square, for fear of low attendance, is a good example. Given the lack of LGBTQ representation in so much early cult tele-fantasy, it begs the question - what has fostered this interest in cult TV from LGBTQ fans? By returning to some of the foundational texts in the industrial development of cult tele-fantasy today, we can see those texts are - as Gwenllian-Jones noted - escapist, offering queers in their bedrooms fantastic worlds as a distraction from their real-world oppression. However, they also challenge models of fixed gender and sexuality identity subsequently identified by queer theorists as central to hegemonic heteronormativity. If canon cult tele-fantasy is defined by its edginess, its generic hybridity, hyper-diegesis and its enigmatic nature (Jones and Pearson, 2004; Hills, 2004; Short, 2011 and Lavery, 2010) then, given its historical interest in non-normative models of gender and sexual identity, I would argue we need to question whether we have fully accounted for its importance, in terms of what makes cult TV, cult.

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1. I will use the term queer in this piece to refer to contextual non-normative versions of gender and sexuality. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)