

# Kings of Infinite Space: Cult Television Characters and Narrative Possibilities (see Appendix One)

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An American Supreme Court Justice once famously claimed that he could not define pornography but knew it when he saw it. Much the same might be said of cult film and cult television: the industry, fans and scholars use the terms to refer to very different things but all know cult film or cult television when they see it. This essay seeks to untangle these definitional problems by contrasting cult film with cult television in terms of texts, production and reception. Following on from this, a more detailed discussion of cult television focuses upon character in *Star Trek*; the infinite narrative spaces of the cult television series permitting its characters greater possibilities than their cult film or non-cult television counterparts.

## **Part One: Cult Film, Cult Television**

What is cult film? The essays collected in J. P. Telotte's 1991 anthology took a relatively consensual view of the matter. Cult films were either midnight movies (*Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Eraser Head*) or classics such as *Casablanca*. Nine years later, judging by Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper's 2000 anthology, the consensus had broken down. The volume includes essays on the following: *Rocky Horror Picture Show*; Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste*, *Meet the Feebles* and *Braindead*; Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall*, *Showgirls* and *Starship Troopers*; hardcore videos focusing on female ejaculation and lactation; *Rollerball*; Lucio Fulci's *The Beyond*; *Enter the Dragon*; Russ Meyer films; *Rebel Without a Cause*; *The Misfits*; British television's *Thunderbirds*; David Cronenberg's *Shivers* and *Crash*; Doris Wishman's exploitation films; *The Exorcist*; snuff films; *The Cars That Ate Paris* and *From Dusk Till Dawn*. What, if anything, links these films together? Lack of style or good taste? Excessive sex or violence? Ideological transgression? All have been mooted as characteristics of cult cinema, but none encompasses all the texts to which the label cult has been applied. The common characteristic is found not in the texts but in their viewers; most commentators on cult cinema agree that the films elicit an excessive devotion which Mendik and Harper refer to as "a ritualistic form of near obsession": "The cult film draws on a (hard)core of audience interest and involvement which is not just the result of random, directionless entertainment-seeking, but rather a combination of intense physical and emotional involvement" (Mendik and Harper, 2000: 7). The mode of reception, rather than the mode of production or textual characteristics, seems best to define cult film.

Scholars have written of cult television in terms of textual characteristics, the mode of production and the mode of reception (see Appendix Two). Some have discussed the post-modern intertextual awareness displayed by such cult programmes as *Twin Peaks*, *The Avengers* and *The X-Files*. Collins says of *Twin Peaks*, "The style is aggressively eclectic,

utilising a number of visual, narrative and thematic conventions from Gothic horror, science fiction, and the police procedural as well as soap opera" (Collins, 1992: 335). For Toby Miller, *The Avengers'* postmodernity resides in its excess of meaning, the clashing of generic and diegetic signifiers, and its borrowing from and referencing of obscure and well-known texts (Miller, 1997: 121). Eileen Meehan interrogates *The X-Files'* tension between the post-modern and the modern, the former consisting of its dense intertextuality and the latter stemming from its belief in the grand narrative of scientific rationality (Meehan, 1998). Jimmie L. Reeves, Mark C. Rodgers and Michael Epstein argue that the emergence of the cult television phenomenon relates to a reconfiguration of the American television industry, particularly to the declining audiences of the three major television networks, ABC, CBS and NBC. Both Collins and Reeves et al. point to the audience fragmentation ensuring from competing networks, such as Fox, and new technologies, such as VCRs and satellite, as fragmenting the mass audience upon which the networks had relied that caused programmers to seek for smaller but demographically desirable "niche audiences" or to commission shows that "put together series of interlocking appeals to a number of discrete but potentially interconnected audiences" (Collins, 1992: 342). Reeves et al. argue that successful cult television programmes attract a "relatively large percentage of avid fans", defined as "those viewers for whom the show is not only a special event but also a major source of self-definition, a kind of quasi-religious experience" (Reeves et al., 1996: 27-26). The most important scholarly investigations of cult television have focused on those avid fans (Jenkins, 1992; Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995).

Fannish devotion figures prominently in accounts of both cult film and cult television, but the two audiences have quite different relationships to their loved objects. Jeffrey Sconce says, "Paracinematic culture seeks to promote an alternative vision of cinematic 'art', aggressively attacking the established canon of 'quality' cinema and questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthetic discourses on movie art" (Sconce, 1995: 374). Cult film fans value cultural marginality, opposing their "tastes and textual proclivities... to a loosely defined group of cultural and economic elites." It is the "particular reading protocol" predicated upon this "counter-aesthetic" that defines cult film, rather than common textual characteristics, asserts Sconce (Sconce, 1995: 372). Some scholars, e.g. Henry Jenkins and Constance Penley, have argued that cult television fans are similarly oppositional, engaging in semiotic resistance by appropriating the diegetic universes and characters owned by giant corporations such as Paramount/Viacom and Fox to construct their own texts in which characters engage in activities, e.g. homosexuality, prohibited by the authorised texts (Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1997). In keeping with cultural studies re-evaluation of the resistance paradigm of reception, others now assert that the fans position themselves against the mainstream not through "textual poaching", in Jenkin's phrase, but by valorising the "quality" of texts that seem opposed to the debased commercialism of the television industry (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt say that fans' "persistent interest in scripts and the ways in which they develop characters and storylines shows the insistence on literary values, as does the concern with the devices and techniques of storytelling" (Jancovich and Hunt, 2004). Petra Kuppers makes similar, if more specific claims, about the fans of *Babylon 5*: "The [fan and fan-oriented] writings around B5 continually stress the programme's quality status, celebrating the complexity of its literary and self-aware approach and rejecting as undemanding the formulaic nature of much television science fiction" (Kuppers, 2004).

Fan fiction is more of a testament to fans' pleasure in the perceived quality of the metatext than to resistance. Fan fiction follows the conventions of the nineteenth century realist novel

and the classical Hollywood cinema, attempting to construct fully realised, psychologically convincing characters who resemble their television templates. "Canonicity", the degree to which a story conforms to the authorised text with regard to character, as well as to possible narrative developments, is an important criterion in fans' judgements of fan fiction, as it is in their judgements of the commercially produced texts. The collective episodes of the original text have themselves established a metaverse rich with spatial/temporal narrative settings and character possibilities; fans can, if they wish, indulge in an imaginative extension of the metaverse that conforms in spirit, if not to the letter, to the "canon". Cult television fans can revel in the development of characters and long, complex narrative arcs both within the commercial texts and their own, non-commercial spin-offs in ways that non-cult television fans cannot.

Cult film fans value textual rarity, cult television fans revel in textual plenitude. Prior to the emergence of the home video market and multiple cable/satellite television channels, cult film fans behaved like bibliophiles seeking out priceless volumes. Viewing the films required effort; collectors formed networks of aficionados who bought, sold, and swapped rare prints; audiences gathered at fleapit cinemas for late night screenings. Owning or viewing an obscure film gave fans status within the cult film community. Even today, fans carefully scan the television listings for sightings of rare films, while others patronise the video distributors who specialise in what Jeffrey Sconce terms "para-cinema" (Sconce, 1995). Fans of those few block-buster films that attain cult status, such as *Star Wars*, argues Matt Hills, derive their value not from rarity but from repetition; the fan who has seen *The Empire Strikes Back* fifty times has greater status than one who has seen it only five times, but the very substitution of repetition for rarity testifies to the value that the latter maintains within the cult film community (Hills, 2003).

With significant exceptions, such as the circulation of fifth generation tapes of *Blake's Seven* amongst American fans, blooper reels or famous "lost episodes", textual rarity has little cache in the cult television community. Most cult films are one-offs, the serial *Star Wars* being a significant exception; most cult television programmes consist of several instalments; even the one-season *Prisoner* has seventeen episodes. The home video market and cable/satellite channels that made the rare cult film more easily obtainable have made many cult television programmes almost unavoidable. Cult programmes recycle endlessly: local stations and satellite channels strip the syndicated episodes and producers distribute videos for rental and sell-through. In the United Kingdom the five *Star Trek* series air terrestrially both on BBC 2 and Channel Four, while also constituting a large percentage of Sky One's programming. In the United States the cable channel TNN (The Nashville Network) rebranded itself with a week long marathon of *Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG)* and continues to show *TNG* on a regular basis. *Star Trek* videos and dvds are readily obtainable not only in specialised video shops but also in the local supermarket and in second-hand shops. Rarity versus plenitude holds with regard to the ancillary as well as the original texts. The most successful of cult television programmes -- e.g., *Star Trek*, *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* -- also circulate in other forms (specialised magazines; novels; licensed merchandise) as media conglomerates such as Paramount/Viacom and Fox use their flagship franchises to maximise profits across all divisions. Cult film texts never achieve this ubiquity, except perhaps during the run-up to and release of cult blockbusters, such as *Star Wars*. And ancillary texts do not originate only with the copyright owners; cult television fans produce their own texts, ranging from t-shirts, to art work to short stories. With rare exceptions, such as *Star Wars*, cult films don't inspire their fans to produce materials that extend the original text.

The modes of production and distribution that distinguish one-off films from episodic television programmes also shape their narratives. The majority of cult films tell self-contained stories, following the narrative structure established by the classical Hollywood cinema; a linear narrative predicated upon forward temporal progression and the resolution of narrative enigmas. Individual films within series such as *Halloween* or *Friday the Thirteenth* conform to this model: the ending resolves the primary narrative hermeneutic of who lives and who dies, the latter category usually including the killer. Audiences, however, view this particular narrative resolution with scepticism; generic expectations and familiarity with the film industry lead them to believe in the killer's survival. By contrast to the producers of these slasher films, incited to multiple serial murder by commercial success, George Lucas from the first intended that *Star Wars* should consist of more than one episode, the term signalling a similarity not only to the film series of the 1930s that the producer/director has acknowledged as his inspiration but to television as well. The individual entries in the *Star Wars* series do not entirely resolve narrative enigmas; rather each contributes to a longer narrative arc, in which events in one film have consequence in the sequel (or prequel as the case might be). The episodic narratives of *Star Wars*, together with those of such other cult film favourites as the *Alien* and *Crow* series, have provided inspiration for producers seeking to increase profits and decrease uncertainty in a volatile market. Fox, for example clearly intended that *The X-Men* be a serial cult film phenomenon, signing the actors up for the sequel at the same time as for the initial instalment and building unresolved questions about the characters into the narrative. The first film ended with Wolverine going off to seek his roots, a natural starting point for the sequel. The second film is in post-production as I write. Seriality seems an important component of blockbuster cult films with regard to their ability to cultivate a devoted fan community. *Blade Runner*, together with the *Star Wars* and *Alien* series, have built a fan following whose loyalty and involvement equals that for cult television programmes. Will Brooker argues that fans speculating on and extending these films' relatively limited authorised universes has kept them at the heart of popular culture by contrast to films from the same time period, such as *Jaws*, *Saturday Night Fever* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, that now elicit only a nostalgic response (Brooker, 1999).

As Brooker points out, the ongoing narrative with which fans of *Blade Runner*, *Star Wars* and *Alien* engage is composed largely of secondary print texts (novels and comics) rather than primary screen texts. By contrast, during the run of a cult television programme, fans can revel each week in a new authorised episode during the initial run of a cult television programme and at series' end can endlessly re-screen the accumulated episodes. While fannish devotion to certain cult films might approximate that for *Star Trek* or *The X-Files*, the complexity of the authorised diegetic universe does not: the ninety to one hundred and twenty minutes of a single film, or even the several hours of a series such as *Star Wars*, can not possibly provide the scope for narrative developments offered by the hundreds of hours of a long-running television programme. The greater number of episodes leads to a seriality much more complex and extensive than possible within the feature film format. Says Jeffrey Sconce, in an article contrasting film and television adaptations of the works of Charles Dickens:

Dickens' (and the nineteenth Century novel's) emphasis on serial narrative and episodic emplotment... has proven a more lasting influence on... television... Hollywood sacrificed the narrative pleasures of serialised delay, diegetic expansion and heteroglossic play. Long-running television series... face the problem of filling time (or even killing time) -- often hours, days, and even months of diegetic time and space... A popular series in any medium... must

balance repetition of successful (i.e. commercial) story elements with a search for forms of difference that will provide novel variation and interest...  
Television's episodic seriality and textual density allows for a narrative elasticity unavailable to Hollywood cinema. (Sconce, n.d.)

All long running television programmes benefit from the narrative elasticity deriving from episodic seriality and textual density. This narrative elasticity sometimes entails a detour from the programme's overarching narrative arc. The broadcast of *The West Wing's* already filmed third season premiere, furthering the plot of President Bartlett's multiple sclerosis and re-election campaign, was delayed in favour of a hastily written episode on terrorism that responded to the events of 11 September 2001. Narrative elasticity sometimes entails generic elasticity. *ER's* fourth season premiere (1997) was a "mockumentary", broadcast in real time and focusing solely on the characters' medical activities rather than their private lives. But these television dramas adhere to a linear temporality. *ER* can spin the plot concerning Elizabeth Corday's malpractice over several episodes, but it cannot claim that the initial event never occurred nor fail to resolve the issue. The hermeneutic code that structures linear narratives demands eventual resolution. Doug Ross and Carol Hathaway's rocky relationship can take up hours of broadcast time and the couple can split and reunite numerous times, but narrative elasticity does not stretch to encompass speculation about a universe in which the two characters never met.

The linear narrative structure of television dramas such as *ER* proceeds in a relatively straight line and follows a chronological temporal progression (although allowing for flashbacks and in, some rare instances, even flashforwards, such as the *ER* episode in which Mark Greene's colleagues received news of his death prior to the episode in which the audience saw him die). These linear narratives normally play out in a restricted setting such as a hospital, a police station, or the White House in which the characters spend the bulk of their time. Cult television programmes often supplement their linear narratives with a non-linear one that can go backwards and sideways as well as forward, encompassing multiple time frames and settings to create a potentially infinitely large metatext.

In some television drama expectations concerning linear progression and hermeneutic resolution govern viewers' interpretations. Viewers become outraged at the violation of these expectations, as happened when *Dallas* famously invalidated an entire season's plot, including a main character's death, by claiming that the events all took place in a dream. No matter how complex the narrative, including the paradigmatic resonances among characters spoken of by analysts of the soap opera genre, the story can only go forward not backward; events cannot un-occur. By contrast, no such expectations govern the interpretation of cult television dramas. The final episodes of both *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager* leapt forward several years to the characters' futures, including cataclysms such as death and insanity, but the episodes' ends revealed these to be only possible, rather than certain, events. Fans did not protest these reversals, for the 170 plus preceding episodes had constructed a diegetic universe predicated upon a complex narrative temporality that allowed for time travel and the existence of multiple temporal planes and alternative universes. Non-linear narratives afford characters greater possibilities than do linear ones; this point will be taken up in further detail in the essay's second half.

The above seeks to distinguish between cult film and cult television in terms of production, textual characteristics and reception, but many of the characteristics that I have ascribed to cult television apply just as well to non-cult television. Since this essay's second part deals

solely with cult television, it behoves me to provide a tentative definition of the much-debated term before proceeding. I have so far argued:

1. Cult television programmes are plentiful and ubiquitous. This plenitude and ubiquity extends to the copyright holders' production of ancillary texts.
2. Cult television narratives' seriality and non-linearity create a potentially infinitely large metatext with multiple time frames and settings.
3. Cult television fans take great pleasure in the imaginative challenges of this potentially infinite metatext, with regard to the interpretation of the original texts and to the production of their own ancillary texts.

The rule of the necessary but not sufficient might help to distinguish cult television from non-cult television. Many television programmes conform to one or two of the above criteria; those that conform to all three are cult. *ER*, for example, to some extent meets criteria one and three. It circulates in first-run, syndication, videos and authorised ancillary texts such as books; fans write fiction extending the commercial text. But, as discussed above, it does not meet criterion two, being a linear narrative that can only go forward not sideways or backwards. *The Simpsons* to some extent meets all three criteria. *Simpsons'* original and ancillary texts are more plentiful and ubiquitous than those of *ER*; the "non-realism" of animation potentially encompasses many time frames and settings; fans take pleasure in the imaginative possibilities of the metaverse. But fans don't produce their own texts; no one, so far as I know has slashed Homer Simpson with Barney Gumble. *The Simpsons* may be cult television, but it is not cult television as I have defined it. Excluding *The Simpsons* may point to the arbitrariness of the definition. But, however arbitrary, I doubt that anyone would contest that *Star Trek*, the "mother" of all cult television programmes, meets all three criteria. The second part of this essay discusses characters in the infinite space of *Star Trek's* metaverse in order to delineate the narrative specificity of the cult television programme. I am not arguing that what is true of *Star Trek* is true of all other cult television programmes; rather, I'm suggesting that the writers of shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *The X-Files* share the same stock of narrative devices as the *Star Trek* writers. The employment of these devices will, however, vary from programme to programme. I am discussing tendencies rather than absolutes.

## **Part Two: Character in Cult Television**

In the past, literary theorists recognised the importance of character in readers' intellectual and emotional engagement with texts. At the turn of the last century, A. C. Bradley established a reputation as England's foremost literary critic with his psychological analyses of the major Shakespearean tragic figures but is now dismissed as a naïve realist for treating fictional characters as if they were real people (Bradley, 1957). The structuralist critics who superseded Bradley, such as Vladimir Propp and A. J. Greimas, reduced characters to effects of the text, mere literary devices -- functions or actants -- that had no relation to the "real". Post-structuralists, in their eagerness to dissolve all meaning, have paid almost no attention to character. With one or two exceptions, film and television scholars have been no more eager than literary theorists to grapple with the problem of character (Bordwell et al., 1985; Smith, 1995). But while scholars may now largely ignore character, readers and viewers do not. We cannot think of our favourite books, films and television shows without also recalling the characters who inhabit them: *Lolita* and Humbert Humbert; *Vertigo* and Scotty Ferguson;

*Star Trek: The Next Generation* and Captain Jean-Luc Picard. For many, these characters have a greater psychological depth and presence than those encountered in "real" life and are more memorable than the texts from which they spring. Says Seymour Chatman, "Too often do we recall fictional characters vividly, yet not a single word of the text in which they came alive; indeed, I venture to say that readers generally remember characters that way" (Chatman, 1978: 118). Hence, says Chatman, "A viable theory of character should... treat characters as autonomous beings, not as mere plot functions" (Chatman, 1978: 119).

*Star Trek* producers may not be narrative theorists but certainly treat characters as autonomous beings. The Character Biographies on Paramount/Viacom's official *Star Trek* website contain a wealth of "real life" detail. The lengthy (five and a half page) entry for Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise includes the bare "biographical" facts (date and place of birth, parents' names, marital status), a Starfleet Career Summary, a medical history and an extensive psychological profile in which Counsellor Troi reports on Picard's personal relationships and emotional make-up. The Counsellor writes about Picard's strained relations with his father and his brother, his difficulties in forging sustained romantic relationships, his tendency to suppress his feelings. Troi's report includes significant incidents from Picard's childhood, adolescence and pre-Enterprise Starfleet career (Anon, 2001). Of course, this wealth of detail about the fictional captain derives not from the fictional Starfleet records but from the accumulated television and film texts in which numerous production personnel -- among them writers, the actor who plays Picard, Patrick Stewart, and executive producer Rick Berman -- defined Picard, in David Bordwell's words, as "a bundle of qualities, or traits." Bordwell says that the classical Hollywood cinema individualised characters by assigning them particular traits, tics or tags:

Their traits must be affirmed in speech and physical behaviour, the observable projections of personality... Even a simple physical reaction -- a gesture, an expression, a widening of the eyes, constructs character psychology in accordance with other information... Hollywood cinema reinforces the individuality and consistency of each character by means of recurrent motifs. A character will be tagged with a detail of speech or behaviour that defines a major trait (Bordwell, 1985: 15).

What constitutes the character of Picard from Bordwell's formalist perspective?

1. Embodiment: the character is played by actor Patrick Stewart and is therefore physically co-terminus with Patrick Stewart: Picard must look and sound like Stewart. For American audiences, one of Picard's defining characteristics is Stewart's English accent.
2. Dialogue: Picard has a rather more elevated, formal pattern of speech than the other characters, together with a pattern of wry humour and understatement. He has certain tag phrases (engage, make it so, indeed, so it would seem) and is given to delivering eloquent speeches.
3. Gestures: Stewart gives Picard a standard repertoire of gestures: a downward movement of the hand to accompany the command "Engage"; a tugging down of the uniform tunic that fans have affectionately dubbed the Picard manoeuvre; the steepling of the fingers or the rubbing of the lower lip in thought.

4. Recurrent motifs: repeated behaviour serves to construct Picard as the consummate cultivated and intellectual European. Picard drinks Earl Grey tea; quotes Shakespeare and other classical authors; listens to and plays classical music; reads (including Homer in the original ancient Greek); knows about history and archaeology; fences and horseback rides.

5. Traits: as shown in his speech and actions, Picard is a man of intelligence, courage, integrity, compassion, courtesy, reason and rigid self-control.

Both the classical and post-classical Hollywood tradition construct characters as, to expand upon Bordwell's formulation, a bundle of embodiment, dialogue, gestures, recurrent motifs and traits but must do so within the constrained running time of a feature film. Even serial films such as *Star Wars* offer a limited space for character development by comparison with the 178 television episodes and three, soon to be four, feature films, in which Jean-Luc Picard has appeared. The accumulation and repetition of dialogue, gestures, motifs and traits bring greater depth, complexity, consistency and continuity to the characters of long-running television shows than most films could hope to achieve. A knowledgeable viewer of any long running television drama, be it cult or non-cult, could construct a similar template to the above, supported with numerous examples from numerous episodes. In this respect, cult television characters resemble their non-cult counterparts. They may be more heroic and invulnerable and they may inhabit less "realistic" diegetic universes (ones, for example, in which time can go backwards and sideways as well as forward) but they too derive from conventions established by the classical Hollywood cinema, which in turn derived its conventions partially from nineteenth century realist literature and drama. Their creators, like those of their non-cult counterparts, strive to achieve "rounded", psychologically realistic characters whose psychological dispositions motivate their narrative actions.

Despite these similarities, I want to make a daring claim here that I may not be able to fully substantiate within the space of this article: 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. Some support for this assertion comes from a quick glance at several television drama official websites, cult and non-cult. *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* sites, like the *Star Trek* one, include biographies for the characters as well as the actors; the *ER*, *West Wing*, and *Sopranos* sites include biographies only for the "real" actors as opposed to the "fictional" characters.

Although far from being the deluded fantasists of popular imagination, cult television fans join in the suspension-of-disbelief character game encouraged by the producers. Sara Gwenllian Jones argues that belief is suspended 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" (Jones, 2000: 11. Also see Appendix Three). Certainly actors play very little part in either fan fiction or in intense debates about character development and canonicity in the commercial text such as the following from a discussion on the newsgroup alt.startrek.creative.erotica concerning a secondary character on *The Next Generation*, Ensign Ro. A poster, puzzled by Ro's psychological motivations, requested further information about the character:

I can't quite get myself into her head. There are so many weird shifts between 'so-deeply-tormented-my-Starfleet-oaths-count-for-nothing' and 'Bite me,



Captain' -- everytime I think she's starting to develop an actual personality she turns back into 'SurlyBabe' .... Are there any Ro stories around that try to make sense of her psychology? Or anyone care to speculate or share their take on her? (Shalos, 2001).

Another poster responded with a series of examples from *Next Generation* episodes,

In *The Next Phase*, where she and Geordi are cloaked, that's about her a lot; she talks about her religion. And don't forget *Rascals*, where she turns into a kid and discusses some of her issues with Guinan. Also, in *Conundrum*, she gets amnesia and suddenly becomes hot for Riker (Juls, 2001).

The three episodes the poster mentions illustrate the narrative possibilities available to a cult television character; an experimental Romulan cloaking device makes Ro unable to interact with the other characters; a transporter accident turns Ro into a child; alien technology erases Ro's memory. Each of these episodes thrusts the character into an alternative narrative space/time that served to reveal aspects of her personality.

Cult television characters can potentially move amongst an infinitely large narrative space. As John Caldwell says of *Beauty and the Beast*, *The X-Files*, *Quantum Leap*, *Star Trek* and *Max Headroom*:

They... utilised self-contained and volatile narrative and fantasy worlds, imaginary constructs more typical of science fiction. Their preoccupation with alternate worlds... justified and allowed for extreme narrative and visual gambits and acute narrative variations... like sci-fi, televisuality developed a system/genre of alternate worlds that tolerated and expected both visual flourishes... and narrative embellishments -- time travel, diegetic masquerades and out-of-body experiences... (Caldwell, 1995: 261).

Chris Gregory speaks more specifically of the malleable narrative structures of the *Star Trek* series:

Many storylines involve the 'possession' of familiar characters by alien entities or other external forces, so providing 'parallel' versions of the characters. Others suggest the existence of an infinite number of entire 'parallel universes'... Space and time in *Star Trek* stretch in infinite directions and "reality" can be reconfigured in any number of ways (Gregory, 2000: 22).

This reconfiguration of reality offers cult television characters opportunities for development denied their non-cult counterparts. Characters in television dramas sometimes dream, hallucinate or fantasise. In the last episode of *The Sopranos* second season Tony had a series of food poisoning induced feverish dreams: self-immolation, a sexual encounter with his therapist and a suspected informant taking the form of a talking fish. *Six Feet Under* regularly interrupts forward narrative progression with fantasy sequences generated by various characters' subjectivities. Non-cult characters escape the confines of their linear narratives only through their own mental constructs. Cult film characters can enter reconfigured realities, but the necessity to resolve the narrative hermeneutic within a fixed time period (a feature film or series of feature films) constrains these narrative excursions. Non-linearity and seriality render cult television characters more spatially and temporally mobile than either

their cult film or non-cult television counterparts; they have alternate pasts, alternate presents, alternate futures, and sometimes encounter alternate selves. To illustrate this, let's look at four categories of reconfigured realities in *Star Trek*, drawing selected examples, for the sake of brevity, from *The Next Generation* (TNG).

*The holodeck:* *Star Trek's* perfect virtual world has become the ideal to which twenty-first century technology aspires. Characters in all three series set in the twenty-fourth century (*The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*) use this alternative narrative space to tell stories to and about themselves. In "Hollow Pursuits", the awkward, shy Lieutenant Barclay became compelling, heroic and romantic in his holodeck fantasies. In several episodes, Captain Picard escaped to the holodeck to enact his hard-boiled detective alter ego, Dixon Hill. Picard's fondness for Dixon Hill -- like other hard-boiled detectives a hybrid figure of intellect, action and sexuality -- reveals another side of his character, one that perhaps chafes at the restraints of his command position (see Appendix Four). The much-beloved scriptwriter's device of the malfunctioning holodeck occasionally moves the action from virtual to real space, that is the normal space of the linear timeline. As the parallel narrative of the holodeck events threatens lives and the ship, the participants must enact their created selves in deadly earnest. In Picard's first Dixon Hill adventure, "The Big Goodbye," the failure of the safety mechanisms forced the Captain to use violence to protect his crew.

*Rogue technology:* Malfunctioning holodecks, together with transporter failures, are certainly *Star Trek's* most popular technologies gone bad, although there are others. The cloaking device that hides Ro from her crewmates and the transporter that turns her into a child fall into this category. In "Second Chances", another transporter accident splits Commander Will Riker in two and strands his duplicate on an alien planet for several years. Once returned to the Enterprise, Tom Riker, who has taken the pair's middle name, wishes to pursue the romance with Counsellor Troi that Will had abandoned in favour of his career. The transporter-generated duplicate enables a development of the Riker/Troi relationship with no danger of resolving the sexual tension between the two; Tom's continued love for Troi shows the couple a glimpse of an alternative present that might have been theirs.

*Time travel and parallel universes:* In the classic episode, "Yesterday's Enterprise", the Enterprise C is propelled forward to the time of the Enterprise D, changing history in the process. In the past, the Enterprise C's valiant but hopeless fight against the Romulans had solidified the alliance between the Federation and the Klingon Empire, but now the two are at war and the Federation is losing. The Enterprise C must return to the past to fulfil its destiny and restore history to its proper course. The parallel timeline of the Federation at war gives us a glimpse of a more bellicose Starfleet in which the characters are soldiers first and diplomats, scientists and explorers second. During the episode's climax, the Enterprise D shields the Enterprise C as it returns to the past, engaging several Klingon battle cruisers. Riker dead, the bridge in flames, Captain Picard rejects a surrender request with a snarled "That will be the day!" and vaults over a railing to man the weapons console as the ship explodes around him. The cerebral, civilised Picard rarely gets the opportunity for such daring-do. The episode also recalls to life former chief of security Tasha Yar, killed at the end of the first season by an irate alien. "Yesterday's Enterprise" arguably develops her character more than the two dozen or so episodes in which she had previously featured, as she becomes romantically attached to the Enterprise C's lieutenant and decides to return with him to the past in order to die a more meaningful death. The altered timeline has granted Tasha an alternate past. *Star Trek* characters also have alternative futures. In TNG's final episode, "All Good Things", Captain Picard veers from the present, to the past, to twenty-five years in the

future, as a space anomaly threatens to destroy humanity. The episode constructs a possible future in which the Enterprise crew have all gone their separate ways: Picard and Dr. Crusher have married and divorced; Riker and the Klingon Lieutenant Worf have fallen out over the latter's romantic involvement with Troi, now dead; Data has become the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge and Geordi a successful novelist. Having dealt with the anomaly and once more securely anchored in normal narrative space, Picard realises that the bleak future is not necessarily pre-ordained. Although Picard has for seven years maintained an aloof distance from his subordinates, at episode's end, he asks to join in the command crew's weekly poker game, clearly intending to work at keeping the Enterprise family together. Picard's glimpses of a possible future have wrought a fundamental change in the character.

*Alien involvement:* Picard's abrupt switches between past, present and future in "All Good Things" were engineered by the omni-potent entity Q, first seen in "Encounter at Farpoint". Q, together with other aliens and alien technologies, often thrust characters into alternative narrative spaces. Commander Riker twice suffers this fate at the hands of aliens. In "Frame of Mind" an alien probe causes him to believe that he is at different times on the Enterprise, in a play on the Enterprise about a mental asylum and in an actual alien mental asylum. In "Future Imperfect" a powerful alien child abandoned on a lifeless planet creates an alternative timeline for Riker in which he wakes aboard the Enterprise sixteen years in the future. These alternative realities tax Riker's abilities to the fullest, eliciting from the character intense emotions not usually experienced in his normal narrative space. But it is Captain Picard who undergoes the greatest number of alien-induced alternative realities. In "The Inner Light" an alien probe connects to Picard, rendering him unconscious for twenty-five minutes. While unconscious he experiences thirty years of life on another planet complete with wife, children and grandchildren. Although at first desperate to return to the Enterprise, Picard gradually adjusts and eventually comes to value a life centred on home and family. Seeing the spacefaring adventurer as family man gives viewers another perspective on Picard's complex character.

Twice before "All Good Things", Q had created alternate realities in order to provide the rather repressed Captain with insights into his own character. In "Q-Pid" Picard's old flame, Vash, unexpectedly appears aboard the Enterprise and the couple have a falling out. To teach Picard about his vulnerability in love, Q sets up a Robin Hood scenario, in which Picard, as Robin, must rescue Vash, as Maid Marian. Picard discovers that he does indeed have a swashbuckling and romantic side, although Q spirits Vash away at the episode's end. In "Tapestry", Q gives Picard the opportunity to correct what the Captain views as a key mistake of his younger years. As a young Ensign, fresh out of Starfleet Academy, Picard had provoked a fight with three giant and ferocious Nausicans, one of whom impaled him through the heart. Twenty-fourth century medical technology saved Picard, providing him with an artificial heart, but in this episode an alien attack causes the heart to fail and leaves Picard near death. Q takes Picard back to the past and challenges him to avoid the fight in which he sustained the original injury. Picard does so, but winds up in another alternate reality as a dull and plodding Lieutenant restricted to routine duties. When Picard realises that the courage to take risks made him the man he is, Q returns him to his original timeline.

The relative worlds of the holodeck, rogue technologies, time travel, parallel universes and alien meddling, to return to Sconce's formulation, both fill time and offer "forms of difference that will provide novel variation and interest" (Sconce, n.d). While serving these functions, common to all television drama, they also develop characters in a way specific to cult

television. It is no accident that Picard, whom Chris Gregory describes as "arguably the most fully-realised character in all of *Star Trek*", is the member of the *TNG* crew whose relative world experiences most reveal and change his character (Gregory, 2000: 158). Neither the linear narratives of non-cult television drama nor the restricted running times of cult films could accommodate the equivalents of "The Inner Light" or "Tapestry". The hours of screen time devoted to the character, together with the myriad relative worlds made possible by the non-linear narrative, render Picard more complex and nuanced than his non-cult television or cult film counterparts.

Lest anyone be tempted to dismiss the above examples of reconfigured realities as peculiar to *Star Trek* rather than a more general characteristic tendency of cult television, I conclude with examples of similar devices employed by the writers of the two cult television programmes that have a claim to rival *Star Trek* in popularity and influence, *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Several sixth season episodes of *The X-Files* play with the time line. In "Triangle" Fox Mulder, after an accident in the Bermuda Triangle, finds himself on board an ocean liner in the year 1939. In "Monday", Mulder and Scully get caught in an infinitely repeating timeloop. Buffy has similar time problems in her sixth season. In "Life Serial", she must repeat a small segment of time until she satisfies a difficult customer at the Magic Box shop. In "Normal Again", a demon's venom causes her to believe that she is not the Chosen One but a normal girl in a mental asylum hallucinating the Slayer's adventures. As with *Star Trek*, these reconfigured realities can reveal aspects of the characters that might otherwise have remained undeveloped. The Scully duplicate in "Triangle" permits the writers freer play than usual with the unresolved sexual tension between the protagonists. The alternative reality of "Normal Again" vividly illustrates Buffy's longing for the normal life denied her by her special status. Character development in the reconfigured realities of the non-linear narrative is a characteristic tendency of cult television as I have defined it.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix One**

This article began life as a presentation at the Cult Film Conference in Nottingham in 2000. The presentation was co-authored with Sara Gwenllian Jones, whom I would like to thank, although this article bears little resemblance to the original presentation. I would also like to thank Julian Stringer and Mark Jancovich for helpful editorial input.

### **Appendix Two**

The scholarly literature on cult television is even more limited than that on cult film. There are monographs or edited collections devoted to individual programmes (Miller, 1997; Lavery, Hague and Cartwright, 1996; Wilcox and Lavery, 2002) but as yet no overviews of the phenomenon. This will be remedied by Jones and Pearson (Jones and Pearson, 2004).

### **Appendix Three**

Jones argues that the character of Xena entirely overshadows the star image of Lucy Lawless. I have argued elsewhere, however, that the character of Jean-Luc Picard does not entirely overshadow the star image of Patrick Stewart, although Stewart may be the exception that proves the rule (Pearson, 2004).

### **Appendix Four**

I am indebted to Mark Jancovich for this point.

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