

TV Genre, Political Allegory, and New Distribution Platforms

“Nazis, Aliens, and the Brave New World of Streaming”

Heather Hendershot, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

On the face of it, what streaming offers to TV viewers seems fairly straightforward: easy, instant access. It also enables the “long tail” of media, prolonging the life of series that once seemed forever gone. (To wit: I recently told a friend I was watching *Stranger Things*; she responded that she was watching *Lou Grant*.) The economic and industrial implications of streaming certainly demand our attention, as do the implications for fandom—or the arguable transformation of “fandom” into what we might call the “new normal” of passionate, binge viewing. But I would like to consider the specific issue of *content innovation* in the brave new world of streaming.

I am particularly interested in the potential that streaming holds for science fiction and, more generally, imaginative world building. When I initially pitched this roundtable, the two series I held up as examples were *X-Files* and *The Man in the High Castle*. The newest incarnation of the *X-Files* was billed as “season ten” and also as a “six episode event series.” What we really got was one-quarter of a season, with a story arc spanning the entire “season” as well as stand-alone “monster-of-the-week” episodes; narratively, it could have done the same thing in 22 episodes that it did in 6 episodes. The new *X-Files* reads as a straight-up “network show”; you could watch it live on Fox or streamed later on Hulu, but there was no particular benefit to watching on either platform. On the flip side, the show did benefit from new distribution platforms insofar as fans of the original show could be counted on to revisit it via streaming, and new fans could be brought on board because of the instant accessibility of the original show. This meant that the new *X-Files* did not have to belabor backstory on what had happened in seasons 1–9, thereby allowing for some efficiency in storytelling. Otherwise, however, the series was not innovative in terms of making use of the affordances of streaming. In terms of world building, it took us back to a universe we already knew (or could easily take a refresher course in).

If the *X-Files* is a comparatively “old school” media product appealing to a broad audience of sci-fi/fantasy/horror/melodrama viewers, *The Man in the High Castle* is both a powerful genre text, appealing to a niche audience of sci-fi/fantasy fans of virtually any political orientation, and a successful industrial product that pushes forward Amazon’s reputation as a content producer. Based on Philip K. Dick’s 1963 Hugo Award winning novel, and developed by former *X-Files* producer Frank Spotnitz and co-produced by Ridley Scott, Amazon’s 10-episode series takes place in an alternative reality in which the Allied powers lost World War II. In a nutshell, it offers a view of a “fascist America” accessible to both left and right—is this an allegory for Trump’s America? Obama’s? Sanders’? As multivalent allegory, the show pushes all the buttons that the best sci-fi pushes.

And because it is all produced at once, without the tyranny of ratings one week forcing changes in scripts for later shows, the producers/writers can create a more coherent, obsessively detailed world. As one of the *Castle* actors explains, the “peculiar...and tiny

little elements” of the early episodes come to dominate by the end: “the peculiarities become the actual thing itself.” By virtue of not being advertising dependent, and being released en masse rather than episode-by-episode, *Castle* is free to geek-out in pursuing its world building, creating an alternative universe with unabashedly niche appeal.

Further, unlike “regular” TV such as *X-Files*, *Castle* does not have to be conceptualized by writers in terms of segments (or miniature “acts”) with cliffhangers at spots where commercials will be inserted. Streaming offers writers an opportunity to tell a story, and build a world, without the necessity of creating artificial dramatic breaks, and, since episodes run between 50 minutes and an hour long, they have flexibility to use the amount of time they need to tell their stories. The writers can presume (in some cases mistakenly, but certainly not farfetchedly) a bingeing viewer, and I believe that this helps enable a richness of textured design in which details accrete and build in a complex way that would be more difficult in the old world of network/cable TV. In terms of musical design, for example, *Castle* offers a disturbing world in which rock-and-roll never existed; the music that does exist—contraband “negro” music, innocuous ballads that make Connie Francis seem edgy—reveals much about the complicated alternative universe laid before us. These are the kinds of design details that I would like to unpack further in the course of our roundtable discussion.