

# Science Fiction Double Feature

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Science Fiction programmes currently seem to be riding a wave of popularity that shows no sign of dying down. A glance at the schedules shows a dozen pretenders to Chris Carter's rapidly thinning crown, each one desperately trying to replicate a formula that guarantees instant commercial success. Thanks to a few noticeable triumphs TV execs have got the distinct impression the public loves the SF genre and all who sail in her. But, whilst it's true that there's a glut of cult programmes on at the moment, most of them tread water for a few episodes then sink without trace. And all for one simple reason: those few successful programmes should never have been classified as science fiction at all.

Generally speaking, the science fiction genre is more concerned with the idea as hero than individual characters. Which ultimately means that the closest the viewing public gets to science fiction is big screen smashes like *Aliens*, *Cube* or *Pitch Black*. Let's be honest, Ripley's character doesn't have much to do with the spectacle of *Aliens*, even if you can argue she has one; her function is to serve the story and very little else. The same goes for most science fiction: all you need is a concept, a collection of set pieces and a few gems of cod psychology from the back of a cereal packet and you've got your desired result: a two-hour excuse to pig out on popcorn and coke.

The rules of television, though, are different. For a television programme to become successful it must instil audience loyalty, something rarely generated by the grinding gears of a publicity machine alone. The ideas and scenarios are still what set these programmes apart from **Casualty** and **Morse** but they just set up a different context. What's important to the audience's continued interest for television is characterisation; someone for them to relate to as well as, in a few notable cases, lust after. It's a rule that applies to almost all the cult series produced today. Trouble is, we still can't explain why some of them do quite a good job of taking over the world. But we can. The elusive ingredient is magic.

We're not talking about that kind of magic which gives a series its elusive charm. What we're talking about is *real* magic and the fact that the major successes of recent years have managed to combine science and magic into a glorious whole snatching a big chunk of the audience as they go. At first glance it seems a bit strange. Science, after all, destroys magic; its purpose is to explain things in concrete terms,

giving everything set rules. Magic, on the other hand, is the untameable and supernatural, a direct opposite of everything science entails. There are rules, of course, but they're vaguer and you just have to accept how unpredictable they are. But, if you can see how the audience responds to the two forces and combine them then you're onto a winner.

There are rough trends which show how magic and science based fiction appeal to different parts of the audience. On a really over-simplistic level it's true that children are generally happy enough to accept magic as an explanation, whereas teenagers tend to shy away from it. That's because as you grow up you start to discover coherent (well, okay, *coherentish*) rules about the way the world works, which means that magic doesn't seem quite as good an explanation as it used to. For adults, though, magic comes back into play. They spend so long having to add new rules to their understanding of the world that it becomes unbelievably complicated and after a while any sufficiently complicated set of rules becomes indistinguishable from chaos. Frankly, no matter what a group of pipe-smoking Oxford physicists may tell you, chaos and science just aren't comfortable bedfellows in the mind of the average man on the street.

This means that cult programmes have a bit of a problem on their hands. They've somehow got to appeal to a wide audience when not all the audience finds science fiction acceptable. Some can handle it in moderation but generally they find it a bit clinical for large-scale consumption. The upshot is that if you look at any of the most popular sci-fi programmes of the last few years you'll find they're only loosely based on science itself. On the whole it's magic, or something close, that fuels the show.

The success of **Buffy** and **Angel** are the most obvious examples of this. Both shows feature hardly any science in their fiction – even in those few episodes which feature clichéd sci-fi themes such as evil robots and... well, just killer robots, as it happens. Buffy's latest encounters with the Initiative and Adam are the closest the series has got to standard science fiction fare, and at its worst the arc has shamelessly ripped chunks out of *Frankenstein*, the novel that started the ball rolling anyway. Mind you, despite the sidelining of science it's hugely popular amongst teenagers and young adults.

Most of the appeal is obvious: **Buffy** and **Angel** feature characters of roughly the same apparent age

of most of its audience. They share their references, worries and attitudes, and yet they're prettier, cleverer and as in control of their lives as teenagers like to think they are. All of which is pretty vital to audience identification, really. But the way the magic in the show is treated is just as important: it's effectively a twisted science in its own right. The spells and demons are identifiable and researchable, they're recorded and detailed in posterity and all the characters treat it as perfectly normal, not as some delicious perversion. It's a clever trick; by blurring occult and science these series have blurred the boundaries between the age groups and, like **the X-Files** of old, cast a nifty little spell on their audience.

Ah, yes: the X-Files – an interesting case. When it first arrived in a blaze of "well, it's a bit like **Moonlighting**" publicity – a brilliantly misplaced angle if ever there was one - **The X-Files** was a supernatural mystery series. It avoided explanations, explicitness and clichés like the plague. It gave the viewer the feeling that Mulder had more chance of being right than Scully did of mislaying her hairspray. It did all that, though, within the confines of impartial and meticulous research - a good balance, and one that paid dividends in almost every country in the world. Now, though, it's all gone horribly wrong. The show's wholehearted embrace of decades old men in black cliché has eroded the appeal, except in America where that sort of thing's a staple part of the culture anyway. In Britain, for example, it now finds itself shoved around the schedules in a desperate attempt to catch an audience which is deserting in droves. **The X-Files** has spectacularly managed to shoot itself in the foot. Which is unfortunate, really, because its foot was in its mouth at the time.

**The X-Files** isn't the only example of a series that's alienated its fans with science fiction. The BBC and Virgin **Doctor Who** novels, pretty much the only incarnation of the Doctor's adventures these days, have split the original fans into two groups. Some fans, usually the ones who joined the tv series towards the end of its run, view **Doctor Who** as a fun Science Fiction series and have welcomed the novels emphasis on science fiction with open arms. The series has become darker and edgier in style, swimming towards the lure of more science fiction influences from film and 'hard' SF literature. Essentially, they're adventures for the Aliens generation: cynical, referential and constantly striving for bigger bangs – in as

many senses of the word as you'd care to think of. But in this case the old audience still has something to enjoy; in a canny marketing trick the publishers have produced further adventures designed to slot between the tv serials. It's sneaky, and you could only really do it in a range of books, but tv executives everywhere should be taking note: success relies on getting lots of different groups to buy your product. (And if they won't, you package it differently.)

And it's being able to mix the two which proves to be the hallmark of the most successful series. **Doctor Who** ratings were picking up in 1989, before the BBC pulled the plug in 1989, by blatantly ransacking vampire myths, Arthurian legend and even throwing in an archetypal haunted house. Like **Buffy** today, it managed to mix those elements with authoritative explanation and out of this world science. For all the series life the Doctor's appeal was in his style of magician-cum professor; even at his most authoritative he lent each discovery the undeniable feeling that he still couldn't believe it even if he could explain it.

A similar feat was pulled off 26 years earlier in **Quatermass and the Pit**. For most of the episodes it bounds along under its own weirdness; it's scary and intriguing as inexplicable events are played out in contemporary London. At the end, though, it shows that the paranormal can be explained in scientific terms, managing to straddle two different audience groups in one go and securing it a place in the TV hall of fame a classic which has served most of its successors in cult programming well for the last thirty-odd years.

Even **Star Trek**, a melee of science fiction and soap, always features the sort of techno-babble that's more like incantations than real science. They're clever, though; it always sounds about right which means that you could nod sagely and assume it's real science or happily ignore the whole thing and accept it for the hokum it actually is. **Star Trek**, though, suffers from a po-faced determination to explain everything which explains why its ratings aren't much more than average. But that, of course, isn't really an issue; The franchise is such a power in its own right that the tv series is only a tiny consideration.

Even **Farscape**, doing quite nicely for itself these days, does the same thing. However much it resembles **Blake's Seven** at times, its science is even less existent. In fact, the **Farscape** technology is so far removed from the characters' own that they may as well be waving magic wands instead of guns. In the

first few episodes of Season Two alone, it's been more concerned with magic and character than science. So far the closest it came to SF is falling foul of that old stand-by "radiation" as a scientific sounding substitute for the unexplained, and that seems a bit of concession after some heavy magic-led episodes at the beginning of its second season.

Ultimately, British viewers don't respond too well to science in their fiction. In fact, series become most successful when they combine magical feats with the credible authority that science can provide. It's a case of walking a fine line between science and fantasy, incorporating enough of one to pull its fans in, whilst not – ahem - alienating anyone else. To shift the emphasis of Clarke's law, in the case of the most successful cult shows, magic is indistinguishable from science.