

Send in the Clones

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It's probably the biggest complaint of the end of the twentieth century: the feeling that you've seen it all before. Whether you're watching Top of the Pops or your favourite cult tv show you've probably had that niggling sensation of déjà vu. Even the last year's churned out yet another version of **The Invisible Man** and a high profile remake of **Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)** to boot. Should we be worried that TV writers are getting a bit stuck for ideas?

Well, possibly. Apart from the obvious ones mentioned above, which you've got to admit are fairly easy targets, there's a more than a bit that's familiar about current sci-fi shows. **Farscape**, for example, despite being SF's brightest new series (and probably everything Paramount wanted **Voyager** to be), reads pretty much like the bastard offspring of **Buck Rogers** and **Blake's Seven** – although we'll leave you to draw your own conclusions as to which of the seven was involved. Think about it: in both **Buck** and **Farscape** an astronaut winds up, through a bit of rapidly glossed over science, trapped in a completely different world than from the one he's used to. With **Blake's Seven**, though, the parallel's even stronger: a group of rebels living on board a bewilderingly advanced ship with an intelligent pilot en suite. Not only that but you've also got an insanely camp military commander with a leather fixation.

SEEK, LOCATE, REPLICATE

You're probably getting the picture by now; fuse those classics of seventies SF together and you've got yourself something that looks oddly like the Henson Organisation's new series. The only real difference is that **Farscape** looks modern with its more organic technology – so in vogue at the moment - and less in the way of spandex and leatherette sofas - which, whatever **Changing Rooms** might think, isn't. It's a small mercy, but you can still be grateful.

It's not always a combination of broad ideas that creates suspiciously uniform programmes. **The Last Train** has got more than a few overtones of the twenty year-old **Survivors** in which a small group of people struggle to... well, *survive* after a global catastrophe. With these two, though, not only is the premise the same, but both series rely on characters for their drama than on effects and SF clichés, which makes them almost unique these days - except from each other. And then there's **First Wave**, which looks more than a little bit like **The Invaders**, **Quantum Leap** which is on very familiar terms with

The Time Tunnel, and so on.

Most people are probably a bit charitable and assume the similarities aren't intentional, even if some cases stretch credibility a bit. But just occasionally it seems that networks are more than happy doing a creative smash and grab job. That's not just the case of remakes where it tends to be pretty obvious; sometimes they go all out to "echo" another programme. Take Chris Carter, for example, who's frequently admitted being inspired to create **the X-Files** by watching **Kolchak: The Night Stalker**. What's interesting there is that although the parallels between Darren McGavin's demon-hunting reporter and his FBI equivalents are easily spotted, it's actually **Buffy the Vampire Slayer** which manages to keep the faith. Despite it's teen-series feel, **Buffy** is rather more keen on hunting down of the weird and wonderful amongst us and likes the supernatural more than Carter's wunderkind which, in all fairness, has got seriously bogged down in UFO mythology instead. It's an interesting thought that unconscious parallels are more striking than intentional ones.

But it's good old **Star Trek** that remains the scariest recycler of all – in fact it's a wonder someone doesn't give them an award. It's no secret that **The Next Generation** was a deliberate attempt to revive the format of the first **Trek** series, although they probably intended it to pull in more viewers than the original. It's equally true that the same template was used to create **Voyager**. The only exception to the rule is the sore thumb of **Deep Space Nine** where, let's face it, there wasn't much in the way of actual trekking going on. It's a shame, really, that **DS9**, looks like being a never-to-be-repeated experiment. Even now it seems horribly likely that the next **Trek** will feature yet another Enterprise and start the whole laborious process all over again. Of course, that does makes you wonder what they'll call the Enterprises when the alphabet runs out, but then they'll probably start on runes instead.

ENIGMATIC VARIATIONS

Based on all that evidence it does look like any cult show you could care to mention has something borrowed from something old. But why should that happen? It's often said that art's supposed to reflect life, which kind of explains sixties SF's tendency to overdose on communist allegories, breathless exploration epics and women in skimpy clothing. Shouldn't our cultural advances advance new ideas for

series, and if so why does Cult TV keep re-treading old ground?

The killer assumption there is that anything significant actually happened in the last thirty years. You could argue that science fiction keeps reusing ideas from all those years ago because what drives us as a culture hasn't changed one bit. The conflicts we face on a daily basis are broadly the same as they were thirty years ago. The quality of living's improved, medication's improved and so on, but they're just that: improvements - nothing radically new. And despite what some people think, the Internet revolution hasn't been quite as earth-shattering as the industrial one.

That said, there's also the fact there's only seven basic plots (and all of those were used by Shakespeare) so storytelling's always going to be a variation on a theme. Science fiction is still fiction - even when it is trying to be allegorical or visionary - so it's bound to get caught up in that too. Whatever the storyline of your favourite episode, you can usually boil it down to something like Alien Invasion, Colonisation, Exploration, Science Gone Wrong, Utopia being attacked etc, etc. Look through any encyclopaedia of Science Fiction and the same themes keep cropping up. The details change, but the basic ideas tend to be the same.

It's because series have to be drama first, that science gets relegated to second place - which explains why characters can get sucked through black holes without being seriously squished. If this didn't happen then any cult show would get like a Royal Institution Lecture and nothing exciting would ever happen. The science is irrelevant; what's important is putting characters in situations which cause them to react.

Take **Farscape** and **Buck Rogers**: the whole crux of both series is that Buck/John is in a world unlike their own which gives us the conflict you need for a good drama. The method's different for both series - Buck was cryogenically frozen and John got shot accidentally through a wormhole - but the effect's the same. There's only any difference because wormholes are the latest thing now and cryogenesis seems a bit hackneyed.

Basically real science is only used when it's expedient; in most cases desperation and caffeine are far more useful. As luck would have it we only got the transporter because Gene Roddenberry found out how much a weekly shuttle landing would have cost. Besides, it's not a huge leap from the real

science of cracking open particles of matter to being able to reconstruct them and send them somewhere else by subatomic courier. It's absolute hokum, of course, but it's still a damn good idea. The same goes for the Rover balloon in **the Prisoner**; originally it was going to be a robot, but they could never get the thing to work on location.

So, art imitates life, but it's got to the point when it imitates art far more readily. A fair amount of sixties sci-fi was directly ported in from books, which fuelled anthology series and gave us the first incarnation of **The Invisible Man**. Even the original **Star Trek**'s got more in common with classic film westerns than it had with TV or books. Even now TV's probably more culturally important than books given that most people's references tend to come from TV. If that's the case it's no surprise that the series' people watched as kids influence the work they produce as adults. The bottom line seems to be that cult TV isn't likely to produce anything much in the way of new ideas - certainly for the time being, anyway - just twists on old ones with bigger and brighter packaging.

But that's not to say that nothing new can be added to what's gone before; sometimes you can find yourself being pleasantly surprised. When **Farscape** takes on an idea that **Star Trek**'s done to death it's usually handled it in a way that's so unlike **Trek** that even the most worn-down viewer can find themselves quite refreshed. And just try making a **Farscape** fan watch **Buck Rogers** or **Blake's Seven**. They'd probably switch off in minutes. The same goes for **The Invisible Man** and **Randall and Hopkirk(Deceased)**; it's more than a bit unfair to write them off as remakes when what's been added to the formats gives them each a new lease of life.

At the end of the day you've got to ask yourself does it really matter? Even if series does ransack a load of others for its premise, or someone decides to bring back an old favourite in a blaze of glory, what's most important is that they entertain.

Ask anyone: it's not what you got, it's what you do with it that counts.