Abstract

Subverting the Masculine Sci-Fi

This paper will present an argument for traditional science fiction on television as representing masculinity as very stereotypically cold and macho. By engaging with crucial theorists such as Rebecca Feasey, the essay will established some of framework for the construction of these masculine identities, and conversely just why masculinity has traditionally been over looked in gender studies. Judith Butler’s theory of performativity will further add substance to the research of gender studies on screen. The work will also conduct a crucial genre theory into the history of masculinity within the genre.

My research will make a strong case for the development of masculine representations within the Science fiction during the 1990s with The X-Files (1993–2002) as the case study. The aim is to demonstrate that the character of Fox Mulder subverts these masculine traditions, and conversely disrupts the established order within the framework of the FBI. The essay will engage in a textual analysis to demonstrate Mulder’s alternative masculinity and how this impacts upon the shows narrative. Furthermore, the research will give an impression of the portrayal of masculinity since The X-Files aired.

Keith Beard.

How Does Science Fiction subvert traditional ideas of masculinity?

The aim of this essay is to exhimine why masculinity within the genre of Science Fiction on television has traditional been overlooked by gender studies, in contrast to femininity. It will draw upon evidence from key theorists to establish where these discourses originalities, and some of the reasons behind them, as well as providing a historical background to the traditionally masculinity represented in the genre. It will also present an argument for the telefantasy as a genre which subverts traditional representations of masculinity in screen texts, with the character of Fox Mulder as an example of an alternative masculinity who challenges the established order and creates a crisis of masculinity.

There are two principle reasons for the lack of attention paid to issues of masculinity on television. The first concerns the position of television during the 1950’s as a product consumed
within the domestic location, and therefore aimed at the traditional housewife. With the majority of the advertising based around domestic products or beauty and cosmetics, while a lot of programming at the time were soap operas or women dramas. This trend would later face opposition from the second wave feminism movement of the 1970’s.

Rebecca Feasey comments:

“Feminist television theorists were originally concerned with exploring depictions of femininity on the small screen, and as such, they chose to overlook the representation of masculinity, machismo and the man’s role” (Feasey, 2008, p.2).

As Feasey also claims, it is perhaps true than if such focus was placed on studies of masculinity on television then it would distract from the important work being done on feminism. As a result masculinity was overlooked and assumed to be a fixed category which did not need attention from academic studies on gender.

Another reason for the greater focus on femininity studies is because it is easier to understand it as a socially constructed.

Julie D’Acci adds:

“Even through ’femininity may be more readily understood as a constructed category (because its association with things like make-up, hairstyles, (and) clothing), masculinity (is) equally socially constructed’ (D’Acci, 2005, p.379)”.

To add to this point, it should be considered than because masculinities are like femininity constructed by the cultural environment rather than biology, than the same questions and studies should be applied to both.

It should also be considered than gender can be seen as being a performance, which can be constructed by a person’s social environment.

Judith Butler comments:

“The action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. This “action” is a public action (Butler, 1990, p.140).

Often a person’s gender can be seen as an action which is carried out in the day to day public sphere such as their work environment. These actions can be influenced by the social norms which that person have been raised on. Therefore when a person is at work he or she is instinctively performing in a certain way which is expected of the gender, and which does not allow for their individuality to play a part. These stereotypes of performance can be seen in traditional representation of men and women at work in screen media.
Science Fiction as a genre has traditionally been gendered as male. One possible reason for this could be that like the action genre Science Fiction on television especially has been modelled on the fantasies of teenage boys living out their idealised adolescence.

Mark Bould writes:

“Telefantasy began on American television in the late 1940s with rudimentary space operas such as Captain Video and His Video Rangers (1949-55), establishing science fiction as a central television genre. These juvenile programmes presented self-righteous and square-jawed heroes championing conformity and conservatism through a range of clear-cut morality tales” (Bould, 2003, p.88).

It is because these narratives were constructed around the conservative American image, of an attractive younger male as a dominant and aggressive figure whose role it is to save the universe with no questions asked, that masculinity within this genre had been represented in a genetic way, allowing very little character depth. That these screen texts have been constructed around dominant male fantasies also adds to the isolation of the female characters in Telefantasy, and as a result takes the focus away from the discourses of masculinity in Science Fiction.

Up to this point the classic character traits of the male protagonist in the Telefantasy had represented a figure of the loner, who is cut-off and cold emotionally. Conversely, the character represents someone who is in control of his own destiny, and therefore is immune from emotional support.

It is because of these traditional representations being fixed, than the masculinities are constructed through narrow perspectives, codes and signifiers. With very little cultural attention being paid to the character or consideration for any involvement said character might have when it comes to deeper romantic feelings, or wider concerns about the politics of his environment.

Also, because much of the Science Fiction genre is set in out of space, or at least is a genre which features ideas of the future of science and the cause of its effects on people, then these narrative devices can be seen as tying the central character up, and excluding him from human interaction.

A change in the representations of masculinity in Science Fiction programming first became apparent during the mid-1950’s with a flux of shows which incorporated more ambitious themes and characters.

Rebecca Feacey argues:

Since the ‘mid-1950’s onwards science fiction used the ‘cloak’ of fantasy to address a range of social, moral, ethical, political, and philosophical themes, relevant to society. Although much science fiction and fantasy programming has a history of exploring a range of socio-cultural concerns, it is necessary to point to the significance of the long-running Star Trek franchise in this regard. After all,
Star Trek ‘presents an entire “parallel universe” with its own political, economic and social system (Gregory, 2000, p.100).

One appeal of the Star Trek (1966-1969) franchise is how it broke certain taboos, such as featuring the first inner racial kiss on network television. The show also invited a Variety of different races, and sexualities to become central to its weekly storylines. While the lead character of Captain James T. Kirk (William Shatner) was constructed as a fearless leader, with certain macho features, at least his team was made up of men with contrasting masculine traits, such as the more considered approach of ‘Dr McCoy (Deforest Kelley) or the comic relief of Scott (James Doohoan). Some have even considered the possibility of a love affair between Kirk and his volcum-human hybrid friend Capt. Spock (Leonard Nirmoy). It is also significant than a female was part of the original line-up, and that more women have taken central roles during the many spin-offs ever since, including the female captain played by Kate Mulgrew in Star Trek Voyager (1995-2001).

A more sensitive and complex portrayal of masculinity can be found in more recent science fiction shows such as Josh Whedon’s Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003). In Buffy there is the Xander Harris character (Nicholas Brendon) who represents many traditional teenage boy anxieties concerning girls, and trying to hold his own in a fight; however these character traits are contrasted with a witty and charming side which makes the character stand out from other such representations. It is also worth pointing out than Xander has a greater sense of morality than most teenage boys constructed on the small screen, often thinking of others before himself.

In contrast to Xander, the character of Spike (James Masters) represents a more rugged, punky, bad boy representation of masculinity, while still providing a subtle comic foil for other characters in the show. Due to storyline developments in later seasons Spike finds himself forced to fight on the side of Buffy and her friends. This development along with Spike’s growing attraction to the central character of the show adds a greater complexity to his masculine character traits. However it should be considered than while fighting for the good side, the character retains many of his character traits from before the switch.

The show which challenged and subverted the established representations of masculinity on the small screen was Chris Carter’s The X Files (1993-2002). With the character of special agent Fox Mulder presented as an outcast from the start, as his quest to quest to discover the truth behind the existence of extraterrestrial life is very much opposed by his peers within the FBI. In the X Files the world of the FBI is constructed as a very cold and old fashioned one, with the traditional masculine characteristics of men in darkened rooms, saying very little, and while displaying little emotions. The forward thinking Mulder with his alternative masculinity challenges this established world view, and as such is constantly rebelling against the system. Mulder’s contrasting masculine traits embodied a cultural shift not just in men on television, but one in sociality at that time.

Brent Malin writes:

Joe Bellon (1999) reads The X-Files as an act of rebellion against authority and the character of Fox Mulder as a concomitant rebellion against traditional
masculinity. Mulder “is prone to strange moods, strong emotions, and light-hearted comments”, unlike more traditional male cop characters who flaunt a devil-may-care attitude as a kind of macho display, however Mulder represents the emotional and emphatic balance to Scully’s logic and rationality (p.150).

The Mulder character has many complex character traits which are in direct opposition to the tradition of the male cop characters from other television shows, as well as in contrast to the narrow range of emotions represented in his fellow male colleagues within the FBI. Often displaying a questioning attitude towards his fellow authority figures, Mulder is prone to unpredictable mood swings which are often set off by strange events the character can sense, and injustices at work within the FBI, or other governmental organisations.

In the episode Anasazi (1995) at the conclusion of the second season Mulder becomes very paranoid when pursuing a lead on a possible extraterrestrial from an informant, when hitting constant dead ends, the character becomes increasingly frustrated at the false information. At one point Mulder even becomes untrusting of his loyal partner Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson). This stems from Scully’s insistence than Mulder has been fed false information. The uncharacteristic aggression towards his partner, suggests of the show representing the character as a marginalise figure, who is cut off from his peers, and is desperate to fight against the system to uncover the truth. These reactions show a much vulnerable and complex masculinity than those represented around him within the FBI framework.

The light-hearted banter of the Mulder character is partly a way which the show grounds the character in humanity, but more crucially I believe is that it provides a defence mechanism against the cold, cynical world that Mulder is constantly positioned against. Mulder’s sharp one-liners and verbal put-downs are another way for the character to rebel against the system, when faced by authority. Such wit can be seen in the episode The Jersey Devil (s103) when Mulder spends the night in jail, having been caught trespassing on private property when in pursuit of the creature of the title. When questioned about his reasoning for remaining in Las Vegas (after he and Scully had been told there was no case to investigate), Mulder’s cheeky replay: “I thought I would take in a show”.

One way in which The X Files subverts the gender roles of man and woman is with Mulder’s emphatic side as a counter point to Scully’s level headed, approach. This relates to the Scully’s character belief in science countering Mulder’s growing belief in the supernatural. Much of Mulder’s empathy is connected to the character’s roots, and particular the disappearance of his sister at a young age, something which Mulder believes was as a result of alien abduction. This aspect of the character becomes a crucial part of the opening four seasons of the show.

An example of this is evident in Oubliette (S3.08) an episode which sees Mulder and Scully investigate the kidnapping of a young girl. Central to the episode is Mulder’s belief in a supernatural link between the girl and a woman (with a similar past); it is a pursuit which drives the character to the edge with Scully believing than Mulder is getting too personally involved because of his past with his lost sister. Also in the chilling Paper Hearts (S4.010) Mulder is confronted by a serial killer claiming than one of his victims is Samantha Mulder’s lost sister.
Because of his background with the killer having put him behind bars, and this added development, Mulder is once again drawn into making questionable decisions based on his own personally reasons, which ultimately places him and other people at harm.

Another subvention of the traditional gender binary involving the lead characters is on the occasions when the agents are called on to protect children during a case, which brings out Mulder’s protective side. It is also true than the Scully character is presented as showing concern for the innocent youth, which brings out her character’s maternal instincts, it is Mulder however who goes that extra mile in order to make the children feel safe, and keeps them happy, by buying them treats for example. This role reversal in gender representations can be traced to Mulder’s vulnerability having lost his sister; it can also explain much of the character’s more feminine qualities, as well as his strong connection to the Scully character.

It can be considered that the Fox Mulder character and the alternative masculine traits constructed through him are at the central of representing a crisis in masculinity within this screen text, and it was also something which was apparent in society during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. The framework represented as part of the FBI in the X Files is that of a very cold, clinical environment with men traditionally positioned at the central of the order of the organization. This representation forms the idea of Robert W. Connell’s theory of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ which can be applied to the male characters as seen in the show.

Robert W. Connell comments:

‘Hegemonic masculinity’ describes those white, heterosexual , competitive, individualist and aggressive men in the paid labour force who dominate the moral, cultural and financial landscape, (Connell, 1995, p.77).

The hegemonic model has commonly been associated with capitalism. The establish order of the system surrounding ruthless men who are programmed to carry out their daily tasks while following set patterns with no consideration for any other cultural input. One crucial representation of this within The X Files is the character of Walter Skinner (Mitch Pileggi). As Mulder and Scully’s boss, Skinner is also the go-between to the agents from the shadowy men running the FBI, the same ones who seem intent on preventing the search for the truth.

Skinner’s masculine character traits are slightly more complex than many of the men who surround him at the FBI. Represented as a sympthetic character that is very loyal to his agents, the Skinner character has a very old fashioned sense of morality, which is at odds to his superiors. However, Skinner is also a very traditional and rigid when it comes to keeping his agents in line, and his stern warnings for Mulder to carry investigations out while remaining within the guide lines shows the cold, and more grounded side to the character.

Kimmel adds:

“The hegemonic male is said to be a strong, successful man, capable and authoritative man who derives his reputation from the workplace and his self-esteem from the public sphere” (Kimmel, 2004, p.184).
The hegemonic male is also a man who relies on being very muscular, and a strong and aggressive figure within society. Skinner’s character also has these elements due to his army background, which reinforces his dominant position within the FBI framework, but is also in stark contrast to his employers, who are older men, who let their politics do the talking. Skinner’s army background can also be linked to his role within the FBI, as both are public service jobs and represent themes of national identity.

In an interesting twist to Skinner’s conflict between helping Mulder and Scully and his duties as FBI assistant director, the Skinner character at crucial moments within the show has come to aid of Mulder and Scully, using his brute force and placing his muscular body online for his agents in extreme situations.

One example of this can be seen in One Breath (S2.08); an episode in which having disappeared previously Scully suddenly turns up in critical condition in hospital. With Mulder struggling for answers to what has happened to his partner or even how to cue her, it becomes clear than ‘Cigarette Smoking Man’ (William B. Davis) an constant adversary of Mulder’s is involved somehow. When Mulder fails to get answers Skinner takes matters into his own hands, using his brute force to get some answers from informant known as ‘Mr. X’ (Steven Williams), in the process Skinner puts his life on the line to try and save Scully’s life. These contradictions curiously places the Skinner character in the middle of the old fashioned masculine and its alternative version.

Another constant threat to the systems of power at work in The X Files is the ongoing investigations by Mulder and Scully which are challenging this established hierarchy, and their practices.

Monica Hulsbus adds:

“By incorporating the unexplainable, irrational, and repressed, Mulder and Scully deflect the hegemony of a signifying system into unending deferrals within the narrative. These experts subvert a positivist, linear model of signification, bringing to our attention these disavowed elements that remain, otherwise unacknowledged” (Hulsbus, 2001).

By searching for the answers to mysteries which at times can seem impossible to solve or which at first may seem to be straight forward, Mulder and Scully are attempting to disrupt or to complicate the straight forward narrative presented by the powers that be.

In conclusion, traditional gender studies have overlooked the importance of studies of masculinity within screen media. This is partly because of the development of feminism and the issues of the gender stereotyping of women in screen media, thus leading to masculinity representations being given less attention. Until the 1960’s Science Fiction on television had constructed stereotypical representations of masculinity which were largely aimed at teenage audiences. A change of sort came when Star Trek debuted, but it was not until the 1990s and more recently a diverse and more complex portrayal of masculinity has been presented within these screen texts.
The key text was *The X Files* with the character of Fox Mulder as a construct of alternative masculinity, which embodies a crisis to the establish order as represented within the conservative traditions of the FBI. Mulder’s subtle character traits, such as his wit, unpredictable mood swings, and his sensitive feelings and connection to partner Dana Scully subvert the traditional masculine as represented on television.

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**Filmography**

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