‘Strange Visitor From Another Planet’: Genre, Corporate Identity and the Arrival of American Telefantasy on British Television

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Abstract

While the BBC had been broadcasting television Science Fiction productions from as early as 1938, and Horror since the start of television in 1936, American Telefantasy had no place on British television until ITV’s broadcast of Adventures of Superman (1952-1958) in 1956. It would be easy to assign this absence to the avoidance of popular American programming, but this would ignore the presence of Western and adventure serials imported from the US and Canada for monopoly British television. Similarly, it would be inaccurate to suggest that these imports were purely purchased as thrilling fare to appease a child audience, as it was the commercial ITV that was first to broadcast the more adult-orientated Science Fiction Theatre (1955-7) and Inner Sanctum (1954). This article builds on the work of Paul Rixon and Rob Leggott to argue that these imports were used primarily to supply relatively cheap broadcast material for the new channel, but that they also served to appeal to the notion of spectacular entertainment attached to the new channel through its own productions, such as The Invisible Man (1958-1959) and swashbucklers such as The Adventures of Robin Hood (1955-60). However, the appeal was not just to the exciting, but also to the transatlantic, with ITV embracing this conception of America as a modern place of adventure through its imports and its creation of productions for export, incorporating an American lead into The Invisible Man and drawing upon an (inexpensive) American talent pool of blacklisted screenwriters to provide a transatlantic style and relevance to its own adventure series. Where the BBC used its imported serials as filler directed at children, ITV embraced this transatlantic entertainment as part of its identity and differentiation from the BBC.
While the BBC had been broadcasting television Science Fiction productions from as early as 1938, and Horror since the start of television in 1936, American Telefantasy had no place on British television until ITV’s broadcast of more. Despite another funny-yet-touching performance from Calista Flockhart, watching Kara play matchmaker and mediator between Cat and Adam was profoundly boring and illogical, considering the horrific White Martian that was tearing apart the city at the time. I’m just not invested in Adam, at least not enough to feel his plight of wanting a relationship with his mother and certainly not as a new romantic interest for Kara. His pain is palpable; he suffers from survivor’s guilt, rage, and a suicidal thirst for revenge. “Strange Visitor From Another Planet” takes him to a murky place, nearly slitting the throat of his enemy until Kara is able to talk him down in a powerful, well-acted scene. One of them, Dr. Strange, sends them an astral-form message, saying that there is dire need for them on another plane. He teleports them all to his side, where a few of their other companions, including the presumed-dead Nighthawk, are! They are overjoyed at his apparent resurrection. Hyperion is there as well, and they realize they are in the Squadron Supreme's dimension. He is sick, but he and Kyle tell them what has been happening on this world. Then Overmind arrived, and the evil alien despot became “friends” with Richmond (really, seemingly controlling his mind). Together they slowly started arresting dissidents and created martial law. America became a state of fear and control. The Squadron met to decide what to do.