

Fugitive cult receptions of conspiracy thriller *Utopia*

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Abstract:

This article studies the relationship between ‘fugitive receptions’ and excessive audience engagement with the cult television series *Utopia* (Channel Four, 2013-2014). ‘Fugitive receptions’ are centrifugal and unpredictable and thus this research offers an unusual perspective on our normative understanding of media engagement as predictable and measurable. The research relies on audience-fan interviews and the longer-term diffused online reception of the series. In particular, the article analyses how audiences go beyond parameters of normalized audience engagement in their navigation of elements of transgression, ideology, paranoia, and the series’ abrupt cancellation.

Keywords: audience engagement, media receptions, cult television, media controversy.

“it's a code name, no one knows the real identity.”

--- Becky, on Mr. Rabbit in *Utopia*

When we consider cult media, orthodox theory contends that audiences and fans wilfully employ cues from a text to seek divergent meanings ‘against the grain’ (Barthes 1970), in ongoing processes of re-negotiation and, at times, excessive engagement. Yet to say one is excessively engaged in a cultist reception, is to point to a space beyond the boundaries of engagement, as defined within industry models for audience metrics.¹ When cultist receptions embark on discussions or presentations of an overly conspiratorial or paranoid kind, for instance, they are not engaging with but angling and throwing ideas and

speculations ‘out there’ (Mathijs 2021); indeed, such attempts are frequently ‘corrected’ by other commentators (through phrases such as ‘that’s over the top, even for a fan’²).

In this article, the term engagement forms a demarcation line between cult media receptions that can be seen as ‘fandom’ and those that can be seen as ‘fugitive receptions’. Fugitive receptions are regarded as irreconcilable with the norms of public discourse, open to hostilities from critics, policy makers, and agents.³ Fugitive receptions are centrifugal; the terms (the words, mentions and references) that are used in these receptions assume leaps and rely heavily on association. There is a shared frame of reference, on a ‘being in the know’ and ‘getting it’ that remains obscure to those outside of it; even within circles of fandom these frames of reference are seen as unpredictable. The centrifugal and unpredictable nature of fugitive receptions offers an unusual perspective on our understanding of media engagement as predictable and measurable.

This article researches the fugitive reception of cult television. The case study through which we do this is the British drama series *Utopia* (Dennis Kelly, 2013-14⁴). As Hill (2020) observed, the abrupt ending of *Utopia*’s two-season run led to such wildly divergent reactions and speculations by audiences that these cast doubt on normalised notions of audience engagement. It raises the question whether orphaned, diffused or rioting audiences, robbed from the text they used to work with in their discussions can still be considered engaged. After all, what is there to *engage with*? We draw on interviews with fans and more dispersed audience cohorts on media platforms (e.g. social media, citizen review sites, press commentary). Since *Utopia* is an aesthetic cultural product in a commercial market environment, theories of aesthetic judgement and their relationship to ideologies of utopia inform how audience and online views about *Utopia* are approached and analyzed. Next to that, we approach *Utopia* as a cult media text – it has been called that numerous times. Cult reception trajectories claim to exist outside cultural orthodoxy by insisting on the unpredictability of receptions (Mathijs & Sexton 2011).⁵ In the case of our analysis, the aspects of ‘transgression’, ‘paranoia’ and audiences’ self-assessment as ‘fringe’ yet ‘obsessively involved’ help in our understanding of where audiences-fans see themselves as a group. Together, these approaches create a context for the cultural existence of *Utopia* after its cancellation. In particular we pay attention to mini-cultural indicators that stitch together speculative interpretations regarding the series and its cancellation.⁶ By highlighting affective reactions within fugitive receptions (from tiny motifs such as ‘rabbits’, or tenuous tags such as ‘paranoia’, to larger themes of utopia⁷). We examine the demarcations of audience and fan engagement, demonstrating what is perceived to lie outside the norm of media engagement.

Engagement Profiles

To briefly introduce the empirical research, qualitative interviews were conducted with audiences and fans after the cancellation of the drama in the UK. There was an initial research period that included observing online fan discussions and watching the drama in go- along pilot interviews⁸; this period also involved production research with the drama

producers (see Hill 2018, 2020). The fieldwork time frame was June 2015 to April 2016; the recruitment method involved snowball sampling, primarily through social media and friends of friends. After the project was highlighted within the official *Utopia* social media 170 audiences/fans responded for interview about the drama (participants defined themselves as audiences/fans). The sample of 56 participants contained 15 females and 41 males, aged 16 to 38, reflecting the young audience and mostly male audience of this drama. The sample also contained transnational fans from Europe, Russia, North America, South and Central America, Australia and New Zealand. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish by Jose Luis Urueta, with help from Koko Kondo. Each interview lasted between 40-60 minutes and took place via internet and telephone, or in homes and public places. The interviews were transcribed and translated by the interviewers; the data was coded by the authors for this essay using qualitative data coding and abductive analysis.

Engagement is often envisioned as something media industries can predict, for example through genre mixing and aesthetic qualities, or algorithmic recommendations and performance ratings. There's a logic that engagement can be mapped in a relatively linear way, and information systems can predict, track and try to influence audiences in their patterns of engagement, depending on the distribution and platform logics. That same industry and consumer driven logic cannot be applied to cult television with predictable outcomes, because of the fugitive nature of cult media engagement. Cult audiences and fans make or break a cult television series, and this is done not in a linear progression but in a series of localized bursts of engagement in particular regions and media spaces and with varying timelines. What we might find here are flares of fan engagement bursting into life and fueling a cult phenomenon. These flares happen at different times in the stages of engagement; the time of transmission of a television series, in between a series as it gathers momentum for the next season, and in the afterlife of a series which can generate flares of fan engagement that can burn intensely over a period of time. Such bursts are typical for the long tails of reception that characterizes cult film and television. It has informed the engagements with *The Prisoner* (ITV 1967-1968), *Wild Palms* (ABC, 1993), *Firefly* (Fox, 2002), and *The Leftovers* (HBO 2014-2017 – a show in which 2% of the world's population disappears). In film, such bursts combined with long haul fandom have typified the constantly renewed cult receptions of *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) and *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), among many others.

In thinking through the unpredictability of cult receptions, and the localized bursts of fan engagement, we can turn to the work of John Corner, in his afterword to a special issue on media industries and engagement. According to Corner (2017: 3), 'a variety of levels of engagement/involvement will be generated across audiences who bother to attend at all, ranging from intensive commitment through a cool willingness to be temporarily distracted right through to vigorous dislike.' Here, we see one form of industry logics for normative engagement as a progression, planned in a linear fashion. Corner (2017: 4) notes how producers can '*anticipate* the likely profile of a product – the cultural take-up across

different platforms and demographic groups with its consequences for product success and future product development'; this is a means of 'second-guessing the "engagements to come" as it were, using a variety of predictive resources, including the record of past success and failure.'

An engagement profile, then, builds on this discussion by Corner about anticipating the kind of engagement a television series hopes to generate from their audience. In the case of *Utopia*, we find evidence for and against Corner's idea of an engagement profile. First, we address the 'edgy' engagement profile for the drama, a feature that fuels fugitive receptions for this series after its cancellation. Producers did anticipate intensive commitment by their target audiences and hoped for a level of engagement that would fuel critical attention in the press and generate good ratings on a public service/commercial UK broadcaster (see Hill 2018, 2020). The engagement profile for *Utopia* was clearly linked to a conspiracy thriller, with innovative aesthetics and challenging content; and the drama was likely to attract a wide spectrum of engagement, from fans who loved it, to critics who hated it. The furore in the UK papers at the time of the first series in 2012, in particular the campaign to censor the drama in the middle market paper the *Daily Mail*, only served to underscore that producers anticipated an intensive and controversial engagement profile for the series. Calls for the series to be banned, critique of its political and moral narratives about corruption and population control, and its depiction of extreme violence which uncannily matched events happening in the real world (e.g. the Sandy Hook school massacre in the USA), all gave the drama an 'edgy' engagement profile. In order to first chart and then analyze this process, and its implications for the use of the term 'engagement', we will first address two components of the initial reception trajectory (controversy and contestation) and then turn to the longer-term reception trajectory and its fugitive status.

Contestation and Controversy

There are two particular cultural elements we can briefly analyse as something that energises a cult fan following. First, the *Utopia* world is intentionally written and filmed with contestation in mind. This fan described the drama as follows, when asked 'what is *Utopia*?':

I will say it is a philosophical human tragedy, something that really sparks real questions and real doubt into whether the idea of the show is right or wrong... I guess there is a big side of morality, something that really breaks apart the way we see things. The characters struggle so much with what they should do... it also gives a real life, real in your face humanness to the characters ... it is a very polarizing show. (24-year old American male cable contractor, living in Chile)

In this example, the fictional narrative relating to the finite resources of the planet, and the question of political and scientific intervention into environmental catastrophe, shape the storyworld of *Utopia*; the narrative provokes polarizing views, inviting a spectrum of positive

and negative engagement with the characters, the narrative, and the series itself. These elements of contestation and dissonance (the so called 'real life') in the narrative and aesthetics of the drama make up an edgy engagement profile for *Utopia* that was picked up on from the moment the show's episodes aired.

By February 2013, the United Kingdom's regulator Ofcom had received 44 complaints about the series. Most of those complaints concerned scenes of torture and of school violence, and in particular the school shooting of episode 3 which was brought up in connection with the then recent Sandy Hook school shooting in the United States. The complaints were met with defenses in favour of the show by producers, critics, family members (of the cast), as well as by commentators to news reports (for a short overview of the complaints, and of reactions to it, see Brown 2013). Soon, generalizations began to be drawn along lines of viewership (Brown, above, found it necessary to list the show's popularity with males and younger audiences, though percentages are marginal), and along lines of genre and format. The term 'cult' appeared almost immediately as a marker (again, in Brown 2013).

These controversies propelled the series into the territory of 'safe transgression' (Barry Keith Grant 2008: 78-79), in which audience interpretations, sometimes actions, allow an audience to go-along with (some of) the story's more radical implications (violent acts among them) without actually leading them to act on those suggestions. Safe transgressions offer shocks to the system, but at the same time allow the system to remain intact. The torture scene in which Wilson Wilson's eyes are the subject of detailed suffering via a spoon (a memorable scene that becomes a running gag in *Utopia*, see below) is one example of safe transgression:

...when Wilson Wilson is tortured and for me, seeing people suffer on screen is something that I really hate and seeing somebody being tortured and having their eye gouged is about the worst thing they could possibly show; it is terrifying and yet I kept watching the show. (38-year old, male German Spacecraft Operator).

The torture of Wilson Wilson in the first episode was pretty bad though, I think there are things that are disturbing like the shooting at the school but again it is fiction and it serves the purpose of the narrative and I am fine with that. (23-year old, male British student of Media and Communications).

These viewers explain in some detail how upsetting the scene is, but their affective mode of engagement does not stop them from watching it. The reappearance of the tool of the spoon later in the show as both an *objet maudit* and a talisman for Wilson Wilson was also not lost on many online commentators, as the reactions to numerous Youtube segments detailing the 'spoon scenes' demonstrate.⁹

For those viewers who operate with the notion of safe transgression, the concept also allows them to think about issues of taboo and regulation beyond instances of violence. For example, quite a few online commentators discuss the abject body of Jessica Hyde, which is commented on frequently as a site of danger. Jessica's body is where the virus and its antidote Janus are buried (implanted). Jessica's trained-for-war body impresses and frightens. And Jessica's tortured body, and the way she escapes further torture (via a waste disposal chute that is used for discarded human body parts) are often discussed as a site of transgression. When that happens, audiences use the language of safe transgression: they self-reference their reactions through descriptions of attitudes towards viewership, by clarifying relations between the real and the representation, and by signposting safety-checks (such as mini content warnings) to avoid any shocks to persist beyond the show's scope (especially fan wiki-pages and subreddits devoted to the character Jessica operate in this way).

Fugitive Receptions

When recurrent, sustained and retrenched audience investment in *Utopia* is taken into account, a sharper picture emerges that matches better that of fugitive receptions. In terms of the sample of audiences/fans interviewed after the series' demise, there are three patterns we can find in the data when re-reading the interviews for clues as to its cult status. These patterns relate to the non-mainstream distribution pathways to engagement for transnational audiences/fans; for example finding the series through word of mouth, via Reddit threads and videos on YouTube of memorable scenes (e.g. the torture scene in series one). Ratings show around a million viewers in the UK watching live or on catch up services at the time of transmission for the first and second series (see Hill 2018), but there were even more audiences finding the show long after the series was over through informal distribution platforms, such as Pirate Bay or Encodi.

The affordances of digital media platforms enable re-watching, bingeing, sharing the soundtrack (and debating the music's quality), and encouraging discussions in various Reddit threads and social media feeds. Here is a typical example of informal pathways to engagement for *Utopia*:

Interviewer: How did you find Utopia?

Respondent: I saw it on Reddit about a year ago and they linked the trailer and I was very intrigued by it and that is when I started getting into it.... At the time it wasn't available in New Zealand so I torrented it. (18-year old New Zealand male student)

Interviewer. How did you find Utopia?

Respondent: The internet movie database said "series similar to Mr. Robot" and it was *Utopia* so I clicked it... Since it is hard to stream TV in Chile I just downloaded it. (24-year old Chilean male student)

Discussions, recommendations, and algorithms all help to shape an affective structure where audiences/fans find the series and engage with it in different regions, outside the original country of origin, and therefore outside the measurement rating system for the series. The feeling of discovery is significant, whether a personal discovery, online tips to watch, or a platform's nudge to download; it's the feeling of following the drama in your own time and in the place where you live, then re-watching the drama, joining various online discussions, and social media feeds, and connecting with other transnational fans in New Zealand, Chile, or elsewhere.

A second pattern that suggests fugitive receptions is that of the prophetic nature of the series. For the transnational fans in this study, the drama felt uncannily real, prophesizing in the storyline a catastrophic virus that has the potential to decimate the global population. Indeed, there is a double prophecy, as it is a cult artefact (a comic book and its cult followers) that sparks the drama's exploration of a deadly virus and the corrupt and deadly politics of a vaccine distributed to the world's population. This is what fans had to say about the prophecy of the drama in 2015-16:

It is important to raise awareness of all these issues because they are happening, that is the scary part ... they talk about malaria for example, and there are other virus that keep mutating and antibiotics work less and different viruses are arising all the time, hitting different parts of the world. (31-year old Colombian female salesperson, living in Sweden)

I thought that they are correct, the population is rising, fuel supply is going down and it is only going to go in one way. (38-year old male German spacecraft operator)

The drama sets in motion a Cassandra myth amongst fans; their cult mode of engagement spreading the message of the series regarding the fictional prophecy of a global pandemic and environmental catastrophe. Fans made connections with the drama and environmental activism:

The overpopulation thing it is actually happening ... imagine this show as real, if they did it three years ago and I have to vaccinate myself today I will do it, I will definitely do it because there is no way that I am raising a child without an ocean or a planet to have in the future ... everyone is going to die and the species is more important than a hundred or thousands of them. It will be a shame to see this species disappear, we are the only species in the universe that has consciousness, it will be a shame but we are so many of us. I am 24 years old and I am going to be extinct. (24-year old Chilean male student)

This fan connected his intense engagement with the drama to living in Chile, political scandal and corruption in his home country, and his fears regarding global environmental destruction. For him, the prophecy of the drama is both a reason to fear the future and a motivation to politically engage with the threat of environmental catastrophe.

A third pattern arising from the interviews was the unfinished story of *Utopia*, a life cut short. Retrospectively, fans questioned the cancellation of the series, constructing a conspiracy about its demise (see Hill 2020). For example, this fan wondered about the cancellation of the drama and a perfect storm of conspiracy theories:

The last episode aired when the whole Ebola threat was exploding, so I was like “come on! Is this scripted or just coincidence or what?” I would go into those areas; and I did also quote that in the video that I made, I have even referenced *Utopia* to people doing an investigation on predictive programming. (29-year old female Mexican online activist)

This respondent’s YouTube video was an alarm call, asking fans to consider the moral issues raised by the drama, regarding the environment, or distribution of wealth in a global capitalist world; the cancellation of the series fueled her conspiracy about the premise of the drama (a Cassandra type warning), who wrote the script (Dennis Kelly or a real life version of The Network in the series), and why it was taken off air (too close to the truth).

For other fans, the premature ending led them to engage beyond season two, imagining the next iteration of the drama:

For season three I really wouldn’t know, I would imagine the conflict of Wilson perhaps being the overall of the coming season as he still works out being Mr. Rabbit, I am not quite sure with the carving of the rabbit sign at the end of season two ... how this character is going to handle this situation. (22-year old male German student)

The rabbit sign continues to feature in the drama, beyond its role as the name of the leader of The Network, a brand mark on the body of leader, and as an actual rabbit that meets a violent end. In the longer-term reception, Mister Rabbit embodies the drama, inscribed in the flesh of Wilson Wilson, and a sign of what might happen if the series were to continue:

You know that he is coming back with this intent and you see that he flipped and that he is kind of on the dark side now, but you also see him make a choice that made him a different rabbit, ... he’s got moral obligations to his friends who were kind of fighting this shit and it is just a whole new curve ball and I know that whatever will be it will be extremely clever. (28-year old female American musician)

These viewers inscribe themselves, through their fugitive receptions, into the afterlife of the series. That afterlife is not just a projection, either; some audiences/fans interviewed for this project indicated that their investment had led them to sign petitions (and try to interpellate) Channel 4 and producers of the series to produce a third season. Others mention taking notes, entering debates online, searching for multiple formats (DVD, Blu-Ray, comic book) in which the storyworld of *Utopia* is further explored. Trolling the internet for conspiracy theories did not appear to be a major activity.

If we look back at engagement with the series the interviews and online discussions suggest three patterns which shape fugitive receptions: internet platforms and piracy sites, the prophetic nature of the series regarding a global pandemic and environmental catastrophe, and the untimely cancellation of the series after two seasons. And yet these patterns taken separately would not be factors in charting *Utopia* as a cult phenomenon. To address this, we need to consider paranoia as a key factor in what makes this a prime example of fugitive cult receptions.

Paranoia

Paranoia is a key expression of the fugitive receptions of *Utopia*. For example, paranoid interpretations characterize fugitive receptions, in the form of conspiracy theories about a film or show's representation of reality (or perceived reality), or in the form of deep dives into speculation over plot points and relationships between characters actual or inferred. These fugitive receptions engage more and deeper than the orthodoxy of meaning-making protocols tolerates, going beyond the bounds of moderation in what is regarded as acceptable and comfortable, and in the process de-normalizing and de-compartmentalizing arenas of debate. That is why fugitive receptions are shunned, sidelined and denounced.

One of the key features of paranoid interpretation is the way it connects to (and indeed insists on) the complexity of the narrative of the text with which it engages. First, the story-world is treated as dense, with a lot of attention ascribed to the background of visuals. References include numerous mentions of the edges and frames of the story. Examples are mentions of the title sequences, on which a good number of viewers commented that they were significant additions to understanding the story. Other mentions point to the presence of 'bird sounds' and 'buzzing bees' (also present in the title sequences) as an evocation of density that *Utopia* has in common with another cult series *The X-Files*. Second, the story is regarded as complex in structure (multiple cross-related parallel storylines) and screenplay architecture (consisting of the interweaving of different perspectives on story events by various witnesses or non-witnesses). Third, the plot is seen as a puzzle, with pieces only gradually forming a bigger picture. Amongst the most notable of references here is the cult series *Twin Peaks* (Mark Frost and David Lynch, 1990-1991, ABC), which also had an abrupt and confusing ending. For Johannes Marthinus Koster (2020), *Twin Peaks* is the ur-puzzle text, the first television show to have been described as such (2020: 6). It is one of the most recurrent mentions in how audiences express the complexity of *Utopia*. As Rosengren (1984) observes, references like these 'normalize' a text to the extent that they embed it

into a tradition, that in itself is now an accepted feature of engagement. Not surprisingly, *Twin Peaks* features prominently on the back cover of the DVD editions of *Utopia*. Fourth, the style is seen as a blurring of straightforward interpretation, its expressiveness standing in the way of a simple interpretation as it were. Together, and when activated simultaneously, these ways of seeing a text create a density that is difficult to communicate (a struggle most of the interviews make visible – as is evident in the hesitations as interviewees try to explain themselves).

Unlike *Twin Peaks*, however, *Utopia*'s paranoid interpretation has a fifth component, namely the timeliness of how relations between the story-world and real world are facilitated. As reactions to *Utopia* show, audiences are eager to mention parallels and associations between events just prior to 2013, such as the Sandy Hook school shooting, actress Jenny McCarthy's anti-vaccination stance, or actress Jennifer Garner's help with the Faces of Influenza campaign to increase the levels of vaccinations against the flu in the United States (both from 2008), or events immediately following the show's initial run. One such immediate post-event was the Ebola outbreak of 2014, which numerous viewers referenced explicitly as part of their paranoid perception (detailed earlier).

We have elaborated on the relative long tail of these comments in the section on the longer-term reception of *Utopia*. Here, we want to examine how these reactions infer a degree of totality: that any single detail is potentially significant enough to be swept up in the overall interpretation. This means that details and generalities not only exist side-by-side (as in a dictionary, without a hierarchy of importance imposed on alphabetical ordering) but also that the number of mentions in a frame of reference is endless. This makes paranoid interpretation a 'scale free network,' an assembly of connections between endlessly possible amounts of mentions.¹⁰ In the case of *Utopia* it means that once a certain theme in the interpretation has received a relatively high degree of attention (such as the mentions of viruses, diseases, outbreaks), it will likely also be a preferential locus of other connections. The Youtube, IMDB, and Reddit discussions of scenes of *Utopia* around which contentious debate exists operate in this way, and as equitable parts of a scale free network they achieve a degree of sustain (like a sonic loop). Since any mention is a part of a frame of reference regardless of its truthfulness or valuation (and since fugitive receptions often already step beyond measured standards of valuation) such associations become enshrined and accepted parts of the lexicon of the frame of reference – on a par with other elements of interpretation. This results in a totalizing situation that erases differences of status and significance in favour of an endlessly deep completeness, thereby presenting the frame of reference as an infinitely vast chain.

This type of interpretation is examined closely in Fredric Jameson's *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992), which argued that a film's meaning and value can be extrapolated from cross-referencing its position as a global product in the context of its political environment. When driven to the extreme, the result is paranoid interpretation. Jameson used David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, Francis Coppola's *The Conversation*, and the literature of Thomas Pynchon as case studies. Since then, the conspiracy thriller and the paranoid motif have

become even more recurrent element in contemporary storytelling, and according to some scholars even a commodity feature (see for instance R. Colin Tait, 2007). Audiences of *Utopia* are aware of these interpretive moves. References to the modern horror genre and to cyberpunk occur frequently in online discussions of *Utopia*. They are also aware of its proximity to paranoid interpretation, as the following line of speculative reasoning makes clear:

Once you get into the depth of the rabbit hole, you do see that it can be possible and even more, so I still have the question of whether even someone from a shadow government or that kind of networks gave the script to Dennis Kelly or he was the one that investigated how things really worked and he turned it into a fiction story to be sold as a series or not, but from my perspective there is no real fine line. (29-year old, female Mexican Online Activist – Visual Artist)

According to Sianne Ngai (2005: 330) this paranoid turn in interpretation is ‘amorphously bounded’ in that it relies on diachronic plenitudes and multitudes, or on endless connectedness and simultaneity. But, Ngai continues, this kind of paranoia need not only be seen as a failure in reasoning (or in signalling cause-effect chains). Rather, she argues, paranoia *actually allows* the manifestation of a conceivable totality. Several audiences of *Utopia* make a similar move. One viewer even linked this to theories of Michel Foucault: ‘Utopia is the system itself; it is a system of power control over people like as described by Foucault’ (24-year old Male, Italian Anthropology Student). The implication here is that the language viewers of *Utopia* use to describe totality or paranoia is a borrowed language, offered to the viewers by the amplified aesthetics of the show (see Hill and Mathijs forthcoming). Audiences of *Utopia* turn inferences of connectedness and simultaneity into a whirlwind of sustained and never-ending interpretation: ‘the small subject’s inevitable complicity (or perhaps even her “paranoia”) [to] eventually become “the condition of agency rather than its destruction” [...] [If] paranoid logic always offers “escaping” as one option, it offers “thinking” as the other’ (Ngai, 2005: 331).

For audiences of *Utopia*, being able to ‘think/imagine’ connections is to be able to move more or less freely within the network of associations at their disposal, in the process taking charge of one’s own agency of interpretation. This seems to have been written with *Utopia*’s characters of Jessica and Becky, and their audiences/fans, in mind. A suitable point of comparison here is the initial reception of *Donnie Darko*. Released in the weeks following the 9/11 terrorism attacks, and featuring the threat of a school shooting less than two years after the Columbine High School Massacre, *Donnie Darko* was avoided by critics and audiences alike. With hardly any possibility of discussions instantly continuing on the internet (this was 2001, well before social media) it wasn’t until 2002 and 2003 before a fugitive reception of *Donnie Darko* became visible, at the Pioneer Theatre in New York, and in the margins of student parties celebrating the soundtrack (Mathijs and Mendik 2011: 67-

69). 'Paranoia' was, in 2011, a key term to describe that fugitive reception, and the presence of rabbits in both *Donnie Darko* and *Utopia* as a gimmick validates an association between the two.

The paranoia in the fugitive receptions of *Utopia*, as observed in the data, is 'not a mental illness [but] a fear of the dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing system.' (Ngai 2005: 299). Again, audiences/fans of *Utopia* are aware of having the one fear mixed up with the other:

Interviewer: Is Utopia a plausible reality?

Respondent: Absolutely! There is so much ... 99% of these things already exist, it absolutely is, but obviously this was like a narrative of a story within ... I want to say the answer is yes to that question but I also want to admit that I am aware that this was a television series. (28-year old Female, American Musician)

I do not think in terms of the two guys going around gassing everyone but in a political arena it may be. I think it is quite interesting and I actually started to compare the show to real life and I was thinking that maybe governments do? have these anti population plans, like I started putting on my tin foil hat, so yes there are parts of the show which do compare to real life. (18-year old, Male new Zealand Student)

The 'tin-foil hat' functions as a neat in-between: both an allowance to interpret paranoically, and a comedic qualification of the silliness (also signifying illness) that may be associated with it. For several viewers and online commentators (and especially reactions to them from fellow viewers along phrases such as 'you don't want to be seen as an Area 51 spotter'), this mixed-up fear is the reason to abandon paranoid interpretations.

It Never Stops, and then it Just Ends.

Cult films are known to be 'unfinished texts,' sometimes because they end their storylines suddenly (occasionally because of lack of accomplished storytelling, sometimes because of logistical reasons) and sometimes because the stories have taken on so much, promised so much, that any ending is regarded as unsatisfactory. As a serialized form of entertainment, *Utopia* also had to deal with the necessity of the 'canceled continuation': the show stopped because the complex mix of commitments from distributors, production companies, writers and showrunners, cast and crew, financiers could not be sustained (see Hill 2020). This is not uncommon. Since *Lost*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Leftovers*, a sudden ending has become an accepted norm for quality TV. What makes the ending of *Utopia* unusual is that both happened at the same time: the show ended as a form of commitment *and* as an unfinished text.

With the kind of explosive frame of reference of engagement fueled by paranoid styles and themes so typical for *Utopia*, strands of interpretation only thicken, never to resolve. Anno 2020, *Utopia* was resurrected as a product. After first having been developed by David Fincher and Gillian Flynn for HBO, the show's remake rights were transferred to Amazon Studios and a trailer, pilot, and eight episodes were filmed and released between July and September/October 2020. The timing of the announcements and release of the show occurred in between the first and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had shocked the world (and is still rocking it). Needless to say, a series about a rampant virus and a global health conspiracy would never fit any patterns of 'normalized' audience engagement in a year that discarded the word normality. While the new *Utopia* received mildly positive praise on aggregate review sites such as IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes, reactions from critics were less favorable. *Rolling Stone's* review functions as a *pars pro toto* via its headline that states that "*Utopia's* US Version of Cult Brit Conspiracy Thriller is a Paradise Permanently Lost" (Fear 2020). *Rolling Stone's* was one of several reviews noting the cult reputation and reception of the original series (*The Verge* and *The Guardian* even employed the term 'cult' to refer to both the series and the comic-book/conspiracy topic simultaneously).

But the COVID-19 context added a few layers of intrigue. In an interview with *IndieWire*, showrunner Flynn explained how she noticed signs of audience fatigue, mostly because social media posters 'just don't want to see anything that has to do with a pandemic,' but also debating 'how close it is to the real-life pandemic.' Flynn summed up the audience engagement as polarizing, with 'strong reactions [...] positive or negative' rather than 'tepid' (Travers 2020). Most polarization however, tended to focus on how much worse the remake was than the original, in uncharitable terms, at the expense of plot and topic discussions (pandemics and conspiracies hardly made it into any discussions¹¹) As a viewer on Amazon-owned IMDB put it bluntly: 'Amazon turned a gem into a pacifier for the masses' (mega0013, 2 November 2020). Other threads were even less generous.¹² In spite of presumed cultic engagement, after the initial run of the first season in Fall of 2020, *Utopia* was promptly canceled by Amazon (*Deadline* and *Variety* announcing it on November 27, 2020).

This tangent also shows how some forms of engagement can, a bit like a rabbit hole, become autonomous meaning - and value-making - machines, independent of viewers heavily 'liking' or 'disliking' a show. It is precisely because of the already fugitive receptions whirling around the series that it is almost impossible *not* to take note of the incongruences, accidentalities, and un-predictabilities that inform *Utopia's* continued unsettled existence. In that sense, any new meanings fall within the scale-free networks that helped sustain the paranoid interpretation of *Utopia*. Engagement in this context is a feature of the displacement of intensity, beyond appreciation and affiliation, towards an assignation of value embedded in (saturated in) paranoia. Such an assignation falls outside the bounds of media engagement as a predictable outcome, reinforcing these receptions' position as

fugitive once again. The value of such unpredictable cult receptions lies not in buying or liking but in the surplus value, or 'waste', e.g. waste of time.¹³

'Waste' brings us full circle. As a textual quality and an amplified aesthetic around the figure of Jessica, as a surreptitious mode of interpretation organized around rabbit holes, as an unfulfilled utopian desire, and as *unfinished* business, the term waste points to the uncontrollable aspects of audience engagement. As 'refuse', waste also points to what engagement profiles cannot account for, but which fugitive receptions revel in. Such cult receptions remain a challenge to conceptualizations of audience engagement by giving attention to instances and moments of a text (no matter how minuscule or sensational, like a November date or a rabbit figure), that can derail those conceptualizations. Fuelled by paranoia and unpredictability, fugitive receptions are a necessary check on the application of 'audience engagement' as predictive and manageable.

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Notes:

¹ Excessive engagement is to be understood here as going well beyond cosplay, fanfiction, shipping characters, or endless rewatching (each of which have been captured by the models listed above). Instead, excessive engagement is where the cues and clues audience reactions become unreasonable, near-pathological (beyond what older forms of fandom study already resisted as the 'pathology' of fandom; see Fiske 1989; Jenkins 1992 excerpted in Mathijs and Mendik 2008: 370-373).

² For a longer thread, see:

https://www.reddit.com/r/utopiatv/comments/icodyr/is_everything_in_utopia_real/ (accessed 24 March 2021).

³ For an example, see David Sanjek's discussion of exploitation fanzines (Sanjek 1990; excerpted in Mathijs and Mendik 2008: 426-428) and Gina Marchetti's notes on "deviant readings" (see Marchetti 1986, also excerpted in Mathijs and Mendik 2008: 413). In fact, the punk sensibility observed in these studies show similarities with *Utopia's* receptions.

⁴ Dennis Kelly was showrunner of *Utopia*. Kudos was the production company. Broadcaster was Channel Four. On the internet, the series was released via Channel Four's platforms (including Sky and Virgin). The DVD release happened through Channel Four as well.

⁵ We have only indirectly relied on studies of cult television, most importantly Abbott, Stacey (ed.) (2010), *The Cult TV Book*. London: IB Tauris (Bloomsbury).

⁶ The term 'cultural indicator' is used here in accordance with Gabriele Meliscek's, Karl-Erik Rosengren and James Stappers' conceptualization, as addressed in Stappers (1984) and Reijnders and Bouwman (1984). A mini cultural indicator is an indicator that does not top a list of mentions in a cultural discourse. It is not one of the most frequently mentioned terms in a list of terms used in a discourse, but it is not an accidental mention either (accidental in that it sort of stumbled into the discourse). It is a term sparingly used, with an outward-pointing, wandering, denotation. But it

carries weight because it assumes significance. For an example, see research into the use of the term AIDS in discussions about Cronenberg's film in the 1980s (Mathijs 2003).

⁷ *Utopia's* receptions do sometimes resemble one of Erasmus' most famous adagia: "Duos insequens lepores neutrum capit" (1500; if you run after two hares you will catch neither).

⁸ For a recent use of go-along interviews, see Stiegler, Sam (2021), "On Doing Go-Along Interviews: Towards Sensuous Analyses of Everyday Experiences", *Qualitative Inquiry* 27 (3-4): 364-373.

⁹ It is fairly easy to follow these reactions, starting with:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQ1g2NWmdyM> (last accessed February 2021).

¹⁰ According to Barabasi and Bonabeau (2003) characteristics in a scale-free network exist independently of the size of the network (independent of the number of nodes), and they operate according to preferential attachment. While scale-free networks are rare, particularly when approached via statistical tools, they nevertheless persist, even as weak scale-free networks. For more, see Broido and Clauset (2019).

¹¹ A symptomatic example is the "Didn't love the remake but wow" discussion here:

https://www.reddit.com/r/utopiatv/comments/kl9s3c/i_didnt_love_the_remake_but_wow_this_su_b/ (accessed 3 January 2021).

¹² If one steps away from the question whether or not the audience engagement with *Utopia* has cooled, or whether comparisons between the original and the remake drowned out discussions about "the bigger picture" (the conspiracy, virus, ...), a broader, even more fugitive engagement becomes visible. It does not take a lot of imagination to see how the timing of the remake's cancellation can further fuel a fugitive, paranoid reception. The announcement came about a week after Big Pharma announced a vaccine. Pharmaceutical company Moderna even announced it on the exact same day of 16 November that the original series had put forward as "V-Day" (itself another point of reference in late 2020's news as vaccinations for COVID-19 got underway). Moderna received the bulk of its funds via Flagship Pioneering (which is also its single biggest shareholder), an investment fund supported by Nestle Health Science, Bayer Crop Science, and Astra Zeneca that in April 2020 raised 1.1 Billion dollars in new capital. (<https://www.flagshippioneering.com/about>). All this happened within the same year that saw Banijay, the largest non-American provider of televised content in the world become the owners of Endemol Shine (itself owner of Kudos, producer of *Utopia*) Amongst the intellectual property and copyrights Banijay holds are *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *Mr. Bean*, *Broadchurch*, *Peaky Blinders*, and *Black Mirror* – a text that several of the audiences interviewed for this project made reference to. The same year also saw Amazon become one of the world's biggest conglomerates – thriving in the wake of COVID-19, all the while appropriating and then smothering a series that calls into question the role of mega-corporations swallowing and then burying products critical of their practices. For any interpretive move about *Utopia* utilizing this information to hold steady, all of the aforementioned elements of paranoia, scale-free networked interpretation as a means of 'connecting' anxieties, and utopian thought as 'emergent' potentials blocked by bureaucracies, have to be accepted as legitimate methods of understanding, from the outset – in other words, they have to be normalized. This is hardly ever the case.

¹³ There are fascinating parallels between the notion of 'wasting time' and conceptualizations of utopia, and notions of 'wasting time' as a "symptom of anxiety" in perceptions of the streamlining of leisure time in what Boltanski and Chiapello call "anomie in a connexionist world" that demand further exploration. See Boltanski and Chiapello (2017: 420).