Countdown and cult music television programmes: an Australian case study

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ABSTRACT:
Music television programs, programs that focus on music for their core content, have been produced all over the world for all types of markets. However there remains little sustained work on them beyond studies of key production periods, franchise waves or biography-like narratives. This article shows that theories of Cult TV can be applied to music television programs to help explore this neglected form, as well as helping to expand Cult TV’s theoretical reach beyond its traditional fare of narrative driven, fiction series. This article offers 1970s and ‘80s Australian music television program Countdown as a prime example of Cult TV, first in the context of its initial production and consumption in 1970s and ‘80s Australia, and also in terms of its subsequent influence on contemporary audiences from a historical perspective. The Cult TV frame extends to the program itself in its original incarnation, as well as additional recontextualisations in new music television programs, and the continued work of its former host, Ian ‘Molly’ Meldrum

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Remember the south London slavery case that came to light in 2013? Maoist Aravindan Balakrishnan, “Comrade Bala”, had kept several women prisoner in a house in Lambeth for decades, brainwashing them and subjecting them to emotional and physical abuse. Now, filmmaker Vanessa Engle has made a documentary about it, The Cult Next Door (BBC2), which traces the story back to its origins in the 1970s, and tries to make some kind of sense of it. And it’s extraordinary. Well, it’s an extraordinary story.

Case was, in some way, essentially (rather than, in specific cases, historically, through processes of imperialism) the ‘standard around which the rest of the world provide(s) variants’ (ibid., 5). What follows from this clearly is a further tendency towards the improper ‘homogenising of TV texts and audiences, across cultural and political borders’ rather than a properly conjunctural analysis of these issues in. Turner goes on to discuss the quite different cultural significant in Australia, as opposed to Britain, of an ethos of masculinist, anti-authoritarian, nationalist values which ‘honours manual labour, is sceptical of the intellect and…proudly sees itself as essentially working class’ (12). Countdown is a British television show involving word and number tasks. It is broadcast on Channel 4. It is currently presented by Nick Hewer, assisted by Rachel Riley, with regular lexicographer Susie Dent. It was the first programme to be aired on Channel 4 and 80 series have been broadcast since its debut on 2 November 1982. With over 7,000 episodes, Countdown is one of the longest-running game shows in the world, along with the original French version, Des chiffres et des lettres.