

The New Avengers

Thames

Alan Coren

Of all places, the commercial channel should have known how devalued the word "new" has become: today, it means no more than a slight change of canister round an old well loved deodorant, a soupçon of rabbit essence added to a traditional catsmeat recipe. It is a tired, rather despairing word of which we who have measured out our lives in coffee labels have grown just a mite suspicious. And that may well account for the critical hammering this series has suffered.

These Avengers are not new at all: the style is exactly what it was a decade ago, Apicella decor, the high-camp detachment of grown-ups playing children's fantasy games, melodramatic production values achieved by composing shots in glossy James Lobb toecaps and the chromium hubs of the less reliable GT cars, with handheld wobble for taut climaxes and camera teams lying supine the better to shoot up villains' nostrils.

I like it. I am glad it has not changed at all. True, much else has changed, both in television and in the life it serves. Blood-and-thunder has moved, since the first Avengers, in opposite directions: down towards the

gutter naturalism of *The Sweeney* and up towards fantasy and the point where the most successful series on the box involve wholesome all-American androids who run off torch batteries. In life, our relationship with material goodies has sobered. One winces, now, in case Steed should bend his Range-Rover or Gambit his S-type; given the state of British Leyland, who knows when we might look upon their like again? In 1963 who could?

So *The Avengers* have been left behind: but there are times when behind is no bad place to be. Their arch glamour has a special nostalgia. Steed's Mayfair is not so different from Bulldog Drummond's; certainly, its fantasy is thankfully less strident than the tinny doings of the twelve-million-dollar couple. Last night's episode was an adroitly turned piece of hokum, beautifully paced and dressed, even if its script did draw incomprehensibly heavily on Hitchcock's *Birds*: surely lack of plot-inventiveness is the last shortcoming one expects of English thrillers, imagination being just about the only component unaffected by austerity?

All that is new is the threesome; and, typically, there could not have been a worse innovation. For suddenly, sexual tension has gone, and left a vacuum free even of speculation: as with much in 1976, more only means less.

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