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The Twilight Zone Landmark Television

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Abstract: Few programs in television history are as iconic as *The Twilight Zone*, which lingers in cultural memory as one of the medium's most distinctive aesthetic and cultural peaks. Derek Kompare examines the show's signature style and voice of its emblematic creator Rod Serling, exploring how the program's legacy lives on today across genres and eras.

As with any other art form, television history is in large part an assemblage of exemplary works. Industrial practices, cultural influences, and social contexts are certainly primary points of media histories, but these factors are most often recognized and analyzed in the form of individual texts: moments when particular forces temporarily converge in unique combinations, which subsequently function as historical milestones. Regardless of a perceived historical trajectory towards or away from “progress,” certain programs have come to represent the confluence of key variables at particular moments: *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957) revolutionized sitcom production; *Monday Night Football* (ABC, 1970–2005; ESPN, 2005–present) supercharged the symbiotic relationship of sports and television; *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987) introduced the “quality” serial drama to primetime.

The Twilight Zone (CBS, 1959–1964) is an anomalous case, simultaneously one of the most important and least representative of such milestones. While universally hailed as one of the medium's creative peaks, its actual influence on subsequent programming, unlike that of the examples listed above, has been marginal. Its compact tales of ordinary people encountering extraordinary situations certainly provide some of the most memorable moments in American television history, including episodes like “Time Enough At Last” (November 20, 1959), when fate, and gravity, ruin a bookworm's post-apocalyptic utopia; “The Invaders” (January 27, 1961), a stark lesson in perspective; “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street” (March 4,

1960) a chillingly plausible vision of social breakdown; and “Walking Distance” (October 30, 1959), a poignant critique of nostalgia. However, its contemporaneous kindred spirit *The Outer Limits* (ABC, 1963–1965) notwithstanding, the series’ legacy has not been a line of similarly ambitious, well-executed and well-received anthology dramas, but rather a spotty succession of mostly forgettable “shock” series with plenty of “gotcha” moments, but little of *The Twilight Zone*’s signature artistry, candor, or wit. Thus, alongside its celebrated creator and primary writer, Rod Serling, the series has historically suffered the same fate as many of its episodes’ protagonists: erudite, witty, passionate, and noble, but ultimately marginalized from a shallow, risk-averse world that can’t quite understand it.

Fifty years later, in an era when many television writer-showrunners have become minor celebrities (at least among industry peers, critics, and fans) for creating programs that are said to function “beyond” the normative, “safe” parameters of the medium, it is well worth considering how history has shaped our perceptions of such previous figures and their series. Serling was arguably the first in this incongruous line of the celebrity iconoclast television showrunner. As Jon Kraszewski details in *The New Entrepreneurs*, unlike his fellow “angry young men” of 1950s anthology drama fame, particularly Paddy Chayefsky and Reginald Rose, Serling embraced the commercial and creative demands of the new Hollywood-based production mode of the 1960s.¹ However, in contrast to other celebrity producers of the time, like Desi Arnaz, Lucille Ball, Jack Webb, and even Alfred Hitchcock, and as suggested by his signature series’ title, Serling also self-consciously staked out commercial television’s creative and ideological frontiers rather than its center. His legacy has thus been not so much the format of *The Twilight Zone*, which followed decades of suspenseful anthology fiction and drama in literature, radio, and television, but rather its combined creative and industrial ethos: ambitious television that simultaneously subverts *and* satisfies the expectations of safe commercial broadcasting—that is, consistently disturbing the boundaries of convention and comfort and raising the medium’s aesthetic bar, while still offering a reliable venue for advertisers to hawk cars, cigarettes, and processed food. Accordingly, both Serling and *The Twilight Zone* display many of the contradictions and compromises that have plagued television’s most venerated producers and series ever since. Television can be a relatively bold medium, but always within the parameters of its broader commercial and cultural functions.

Rod Serling created *The Twilight Zone* in 1959, during a period when network television was still in the throes of the first of many conceptual shifts, moving from primarily live, New York-based comedy-variety shows and one-off anthology dramas to filmed, Hollywood-produced, and firmly genre-based ongoing series. However, the remaining live anthology series, while clearly on the demise, were still regarded as the standard-bearers of television quality, with critical

praise and scrutiny primarily focused on their scripts and writers, in a manner that was in keeping with the format's origins in New York theater. While a burgeoning crop of standardized westerns and private-eye shows dominated the late-1950s schedule, Serling's new filmed anthology series was sold to sponsors largely on his reputation as one of the medium's star writers established in New York anthology dramas like 1957's *Requiem for a Heavyweight*. This wasn't a mere façade, as Serling eventually wrote 92 of the series' 156 episodes. This massive workload, coupled with his other producing tasks and on-screen persona as host, cemented his association with the series; it has since been impossible to separate them.² Although many other creative figures were certainly essential factors in the series' success, any historical assessment of *The Twilight Zone* must start with Rod Serling's writing.³ Indeed, his iconic words and voice open and close every episode, guiding viewers into the Twilight Zone, introducing them to the episode's protagonist and premise, and leaving them with a pithy summation of its theme.

Serling's work on *The Twilight Zone* is "well-crafted." That is, his scripts elegantly and efficiently convey compelling characters and unusual narratives, while also wearing their format-driven labor proudly. Serling's renowned work habits present a classic image of the inspired yet diligent writer: hunched over a typewriter or Dictaphone for hours on end, and fueled with an endless supply of cigarettes and coffee. As Kraszewski argues, this vision of Serling is also emblematic of the mid-century corporate creative: a formidable talent, certainly, but also fully ensconced in the forms of commercial broadcasting and assumed rituals of creative genius.⁴ As a career broadcast dramatist, writing dozens of original scripts and adaptations for both radio and television, Serling learned his trade within the frameworks of network and station scheduling, as well as the unavoidable primacy of advertising.

He was not naïve about these limits. Begrudgingly, he regarded them as a necessary price to advance his career. Like many of his colleagues, he became increasingly frustrated by network and advertiser avoidance of discomfort and controversy. Several of his earlier teleplays had been altered to bury any direct reference to ongoing social issues (in particular, race and religion), while others had had dialogue and situations changed to keep sponsors happy, such as avoiding the word "lucky" so as not to suggest the rival Lucky Strike cigarette brand. Indeed, he created *The Twilight Zone* at the peak of his reputation in the industry in large part because he desired greater creative control over his scripts. However, he also realized that he had to keep advertisers satisfied in order for the series to stay on the air. In a filmed pitch to potential advertisers leading in to a screening of the series' pilot, Serling told his audience of ad agents and manufacturers, "We think it's the kind of show that will put people on the edge of their seats, but only for that one half an hour. We fully expect they'll go to the store the following day

and buy your products. It's that kind of show."⁵ As the series continued, Serling would similarly slide from incongruous Greek chorus to product pitchman, directly shilling sponsors' products and promoting the CBS schedule. While these sequences were cut from the series' syndication runs, and thus seemingly excised from its history, it is important to remember them in order to better understand Serling's multiple roles in the public eye during its original run.⁶

While Serling's entrepreneurial acumen was significant, he was ultimately selling his writing, and that was what cemented the show's place in television history. The most striking aspect of his scripts (not only his *Twilight Zone* work), especially from the perspective of a half-century later, is the dialogue. Serial dramas today rely on narrative-driven conversation, where every scene advances larger and longer stories that typically transpire across many episodes and seasons. In contrast, and befitting the rapid pace of anthology drama where character arcs play out over minutes rather than hours, *Twilight Zone* scripts center on individual reflection, conveying characters' philosophical speculations on their situations. *Twilight Zone* characters soliloquize rather than converse, and situations aren't resolved as much by characters' narrative actions as by their self-realization. The dialogue is poetic yet direct: rhythmically suited to the modern pace of television at the time (and its aesthetically modern forebears in mid-twentieth-century literature, drama, radio, and film), but also capable of piercing many of the era's normative cultural and social veils.

For instance, in "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street," suburban neighbors turn on each other in an escalation of suspicion and violence brought on by a power outage. In the final confrontation scene, only Steve, who's been the sole voice of reason throughout the episode, clearly expresses what's happening:

Let's get it all out. Let's pick out every idiosyncrasy of every single man, woman, and child on the street. And then we might as well set up some kind of citizens' court. How about a firing squad at dawn, Charlie, so we can get rid of all the suspects. Narrow them down. Make it easier for you.

This brash style carried through to Serling's opening and closing comments, which, especially in the case of "Monsters," underlined the episode's argument:

The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices—to be found only in the minds of men. For the record, prejudices can kill and suspicion can destroy, and a thoughtless, frightened search for a scapegoat has a fallout all its own—for the children, and the children yet unborn. And the pity of it is that these things cannot be confined to the Twilight Zone.

Such signature dialogue was in turn enhanced by the expressive resources of the production crew, which combined the sensibilities of both New York drama and Hollywood film. The result was television that regularly departed from the comfort of the normal and focused on existential fears and insecurities, turning those living-room cabinet TV sets into nightmare portals. The series' particular combination of style, efficiency, and narrative impact—entire stories played out in a lean twenty-five minutes—has never been equaled since. Importantly, while both of the series most compared to *The Twilight Zone* tended towards more realist narratives—*The Outer Limits* occupying the generic core of science fiction, and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (CBS/NBC, 1955–1965) dealing primarily in mystery and suspense—*The Twilight Zone* took a broader perspective, moving instead into the realm of the vaguely “supernatural.”⁷ This more diffuse remit granted the series a wider narrative scope, allowing it to focus less on explaining the details of particular fantastic concepts and more on the reactions of its everyday “normal” characters, typically drawn from the era's anthology plays, whose drives, strengths, and insecurities all had to be conveyed within the space of a thirty or sixty-minute teleplay, rather than unfold over the hours and years of typical serial dramas today.

The episode “The Eye of the Beholder” (November 11, 1960), generally considered one of the series' best, exemplifies this efficiency. The main character, Janet Tyler, is in a hospital, late at night, her face swathed in bandages. She yearns not only to be free to see and feel the light and the air on her face again, but also to look “normal.” As the episode unfolds, we learn that she is a physical freak, and her society has forced her to undergo treatment to “correct” this deformity. This is her last treatment cycle, and if it fails, she will be forced to live in an internment camp with others “of her kind.” At the episode's climax, the bandages are slowly removed, and we realize that the treatment has failed: she is still a horrific freak. However, to our eyes she is beautiful; everyone else in her society is a pig-faced monster (conveyed by William Tuttle's simple yet effective makeup). This reversal is set up not only by Douglas Heyes's exacting direction and George T. Clemens's low-key cinematography (which keep the faces of the entire cast unseen until the climax), but also by Serling's words. Janet's longings move from mundane to existential, as she rails against her looming fate and rebuffs the placating words of her doctor and nurses: “Who makes all these rules and statutes and traditions that the people who are ‘different’ have to stay away from the people who are ‘normal’?” As her bandages are removed, a televised speech from this world's leader (channeling demagogues Hitler, Stalin, and McCarthy) rages against “non-conformity”: “We know now that there must be a single purpose, a single norm, a single approach, a single entity of people, a single virtue, a single morality, a single frame of reference, a single philosophy of government. We must cut out all that is different like a cancer itself!” Produced while racial segregation still held

sway in much of the United States against an expanding civil rights movement, the episode elegantly makes its allegorical point.

That said, like every landmark series, *The Twilight Zone* is certainly not without its problems. While its standards were generally high, not every concept worked, and a few were complete misfires. Moreover, while its general ethos (and Serling's) was to question conformity, injustice, hypocrisy, and ethical weakness, it did so within the relatively circumscribed parameters of the urbane, Kennedy-era liberalism seen in both "Monster" and "Beholder." The stylistic vehicles of expressive yet efficient anthology writing, directing, and then in-vogue method-acting maximized its impact within this particular range of critique, but no further. Indeed, even its de facto rival *The Outer Limits* was able to experiment a bit more boldly and cryptically at times, as seen, for example, in the bleak time-travel paradox of "The Man Who Was Never Born" (October 28, 1963) and the searing critique of Cold War psychology in "Nightmare" (December 2, 1963). Not surprisingly, the series' most notable blind spot is gender: *The Twilight Zone*, in sync with the dominant representations in U.S. culture in the 1960s, is a thoroughly male-centered universe, with women typically limited to secondary roles. Aside from standout episodes with female protagonists like "Beholder," "The After Hours" (June 10, 1960), and "The Midnight Sun" (November 17, 1961), Serling's scripts generally treat women as either nagging harpies or endless fountains of love and understanding, and only in relation to men.⁸

Still, the series struck a chord in its initial run by appealing to an idealistic but already diminishing expectation that television should fascinate while it entertains. Although when *The Twilight Zone* premiered, *Playhouse 90* (CBS, 1956–1960) and other endangered anthology series still claimed the mantle of "serious" television, by the time of its demise in 1964, Serling's series functioned as the most conspicuous continuation of the style, sensibility, and ethos of the 1950s anthology drama, albeit on film instead of live. The rapid demise of this precise narrative and stylistic balance was evident throughout the remainder of Serling's curtailed life. After *The Twilight Zone* was cancelled, aside from a handful of exceptions like *Star Trek* and *I Spy*, television drama drifted into the mundane waters of bland realism or escapist action-adventure in the late 1960s. Projects that had grander, less formulaic ambitions were either reserved for the new paragon of "quality," the made-for-TV movie, or shunted to the margins of the schedule as "far out" fare. Thus, despite bearing his name and visage as host, *Rod Serling's Night Gallery* (NBC, 1969–72) functioned mostly as a gaudy horror show that, while not without its own particular charms, bore only the most superficial resemblance to *The Twilight Zone*.⁹

In retrospect, *The Twilight Zone's* most distinctive feature, conveyed in the relatively Spartan staging of early 1960s television production design, remains



FIGURE 32.1.

Bandages removed from the “freak” in this episode of the *Twilight Zone* reveal a beautiful woman, in a typical reversal that echoes Kennedy-era liberalism in its critique of conformity and injustice.

its dialogue. Unfortunately, as conventions of film and television dialogue have changed, this style has been hardest to emulate in later incarnations of the series or its ersatz knock-offs.¹⁰ With the anthology format seemingly no longer a viable option, Serling’s most recent stylistic heirs would seem to be serial drama writers like David E. Kelley (*Ally McBeal*, *Boston Legal*), Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*, *The Newsroom*), and Joss Whedon (*Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*), whose meticulously rhythmic and biting dialogue convey a similar aesthetic function, and whose plots often center on cultural critique. However, their characters also occupy a self-aware space that Serling’s did not. Sorkin’s dialogue in particular attempts to bring theatrical, Serling-esque speech into the twenty-first century, but ultimately fails to convey the same gravity; his characters sound more like “characters” in our time than Serling’s ever did in his. Similarly, writers like Vince Gilligan (*Breaking Bad*), Damon Lindelof (*Lost*), and Ronald D. Moore (*Battlestar Galactica*) have generated deeply relatable characters caught in fantastic situations, but their modus operandi is much more slanted towards conventional realism, favoring showing over telling, putting the weight on performance, composition, mise-en-scene, and editing, with relatively minimalistic dialogue and few of Serling’s typical speeches. Moreover, aside from these figures and a handful of others—e.g., David Milch (*Deadwood*), Amy Sherman-Palladino (*Gilmore Girls*), David Simon (*The Wire*)—most television drama today is written collectively. There are certainly showrunners who function as auteurs much as Serling did, but there are almost none with as much direct creative input and public notoriety as he had.¹¹

Thus, fifty years later, *The Twilight Zone*’s legacy appears not so much in contemporary programs, but rather in the unabated circulation of the original episodes, and in the even wider spread of its most celebrated moments and of the figure of Serling himself. Still, the spirit of the series can be found in the



FIGURE 32.2.
Twilight Zone creator Rod Serling,
 whose iconic voice opens and closes
 every episode.

aspirations of would-be television iconoclasts, for whom *The Twilight Zone* and Serling function as key models of attitude if not form. As star writer-producer-director J. J. Abrams gushed in a 2009 interview, “*The Twilight Zone* at its best is better than anything else I’ve ever seen on television.”¹² As a television milestone, *The Twilight Zone* still holds a unique place in the medium’s history. While attempts to revive the anthology format are increasingly unlikely in an era reliant on the safety of serial and procedural drama, *The Twilight Zone* will always be there—in reruns, on video, and online—for viewers to visit, representing a particular moment in American cultural history, and reminding us of the range of television’s storytelling possibilities.

NOTES

1. Jon Kraszewski, *The New Entrepreneurs* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).
2. In contrast, while Alfred Hitchcock was the executive producer, on-screen host, and occasional director (of 17 out of 268 episodes) of his signature series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, he was still primarily involved in directing feature films, and did not function as the series’ showrunner in the same capacity as Serling did on *The Twilight Zone*.
3. Other notable regular contributors included producer Buck Houghton; cinematographer George T. Clemens; director Douglas Heyes; composers Jerry Goldsmith and Bernard Herrmann; writers Charles Beaumont, George Clayton Johnson, and Richard Matheson; and many well-regarded character actors (e.g., John Dehner, Jack Klugman, Lee Marvin, Burgess Meredith, Cliff Robertson).
4. Kraszewski, 139–73.
5. Rod Serling, “Original Network Pitch” (Los Angeles: Cayuga Productions, 1959), available on *The Twilight Zone: Season One*, Blu-Ray (Image Entertainment, 2010).

6. The “Definitive Edition” box set (both on DVD and Blu-Ray) from Image includes examples of Serling seguing from *Twilight Zone* host to sponsor pitchman.
7. That said, there were certainly some *Twilight Zone* stories that fit more comfortably within particular genres, and could easily have aired on either *The Outer Limits* or *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.
8. See, for example, “The Lonely,” “People Are Alike All Over,” “Uncle Simon,” “A Short Drink from a Certain Fountain,” and “Sounds and Silences.”
9. The ghosts of *The Twilight Zone* only briefly surfaced in *Night Gallery*, as in Serling’s Emmy-nominated script “They’re Tearing Down Tim Riley’s Bar” (January 20, 1971) in which a world-weary middle-aged man laments the disappearing world of his youth.
10. The production-plagued big-budget anthology film version of the series, with remakes of three original series episodes, though unfortunately known most for a fatal production accident that killed actor Vic Morrow and two child extras, and the subsequent criminal trial of the segment’s director, John Landis, was released in 1983 to middling success. An ambitious television revival ran on CBS from 1985 to 1987, and in syndication during 1988–1989, but was unable to garner consistent notice. Similarly, the latest revival, on UPN in 2002–2003, despite solid intentions and high-level talent, made virtually no impact. Copycat series, most produced in the 1980s, concentrated more on outright horror, and have included *Amazing Stories* (NBC, 1985–1987), *Darkroom* (ABC, 1981–1982), and *Tales From the Darkside* (Syndicated, 1983–1988). Of all the attempted latter-day anthology series, the revival of *The Outer Limits* (Showtime/Sci-Fi, 1995–2002) garnered the most consistent commercial and critical success.
11. J. Michael Straczynski, who was involved with the 1980s revival of *The Twilight Zone*, arguably surpassed Serling’s control with his space opera *Babylon 5* (Syndicated/TNT, 1993–1998), writing 92 of its 110 episodes (including the entirety of the third and fourth seasons).
12. Quoted in “Top 10 TV Episodes,” *Time*, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1927690_1927684_1927626,00.html.

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