

Why Doesn't It Work on Television?

SCIENCE FICTION

BY STEVEN BARNES

A quick-look through your TV guide will turn up an interesting piece of information: out of sixty-three available hours of network programming, less than one twentieth of that time, or about ninety minutes, is taken up with shows which can be considered in the science-fiction or fantasy category.

In the '80-'81 season, this meant *Mork and Mindy* and *The Incredible Hulk* standing alone against a tide of cops and robbers, ham-fisted P.I.s, poor little rich families and he-man transvestites.

Literally hundreds of new shows have premiered over the past few decades, and only a handful of them have been anything but the standard television fare. Not that fantasy shows, when done with even a smidgeon of imagination, are unpopular. Take a look at the most popular shows in syndication: *Star Trek*, *Space: 1999*, *Outer Limits*, *Twilight Zone*, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *Lost in Space*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Wonder Woman*, *Superman*, and even (God help us) *Batman*.

Here's an even more interesting thought: six of the top ten films of all time, with combined revenues topping the half billion dollar mark, are science fiction or fantasy oriented. Nearly a third of the top hundred box office champs are the same. With such an undeniably solid track record as this, why does television shy away, doling out its speculative fiction in such a miserly fashion?

First, let's define our terms, starting with *fantasy*. All fiction is fantasy, 'cause it ain't true, or it didn't happen quite that way. Some fantasy deals with the "real" world, and its only invention is to simplify the actions and feelings of men and women to the point that they make sense within the closed confines of a story universe. In real life there are *always* loose ends and unexplained complexities. *Fantasy literature* deals with worlds of other when, usually where magic or differing natural laws create a situation different enough (or slyly similar) from our own to be fascinating. *Horror* is a specialized branch of this, a subgenre dealing specifically with fear and death. *Science Fiction* deals with a fantasy world (sometimes just like ours, except that the actions and feelings of its characters are comprehensible) which has been, is being, or is about to be altered through the impact of technology, or the introduction of some form of scientific speculation.

It is a literature of ideas, of consciousness expansion. It is fantasy tied to a logical premise, a game of *What If* whose aim can be trifling or deadly serious. It can search the stars and the oceans, and the mind of man. It can do anything that any other branch of literature can do, with the inherent flexibility to go beyond the horizon, and

whisper to us of our tomorrows.

So why doesn't it work better on television? There are four basic areas which must be dealt with before we can truly put the fantastic on the small screen.

- 1) The Will
- 2) The Knowledge and Talent
- 3) The Correct Scope
- 4) The Taste and Discretion

1) The Will. Part of the clue to the lack of drive to produce fine science fic-

and going slightly crazy.

But there is no such thing as a "low-budget" network show. Viewers in the tens of millions must tune in for a show to have a prayer of staying on. Innovation and experimentation are ruled almost completely out — what matters is that the product be tried and true. "Everyone wants to be first to be second" as one TV executive put it. Let one "jiggle show," cop show or horse

day?

Oh, sure, you can produce low-grade space epics "on the grind," but they won't be science fiction. But aren't blasters and rockets and weird aliens from the Galactic Federation science fiction?

Not necessarily. They may be *fantasy* (*Star Wars*), or they may be *drek* (Cattle-car Galaxative). Some, like *Star*

really doing the job.

To my knowledge, there has never been a complete fantasy world presented in a television series. It's always Our Town with a single fantasy element thrown in: a witch (*Bewitched*), a genie (*I Dream of Genie*), the ghouls next door (*The Munsters*), etcetera. The fantasy element, once established, is never truly explored, merely used to get the main characters into belly-laugh situations.

This inability to extrapolate creatively leads us to the second area of discussion:

2) The Knowledge and Talent. Writer Larry Niven suggests that "Television executives don't understand science fiction, because they have no grasp of technology. Only their technical crews — the special effects men — have any idea of science, which is why you find marvelous visuals propping up shoddy stories."

With thousands of science fiction books, magazines, anthologies and what-not, why the dearth of creativity on the screen? Screenwriter David Gerrold tells the story: "The film industry doesn't relate to books, except as source material — they just don't read. Usually only the writer they hire reads the actual material, and then he merely hands in a synopsis. What you get is a weird hodge-podge, where they're not really doing the material they decided to do — what they're doing is something that looks like something that was previously done."

"The science means nothing to them, and whenever science gets in the way of the story they want to tell, guess what gets sacrificed . . . ?"

What we have here is a combination of "Get it done quick" and the "art-by-committee" approach, where an idea is bounced from wall to wall until it is weak from exhaustion. Then, tame, safe and simple, it is ready for the boob tube.

Perhaps the worst offender in this has been the Irwin Allen school of rubber-suit aliens. In the course of *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *Time Tunnel*, *Lost In Space*, etc., science fiction's most powerful tool, the *What-If*, becomes "What if a submarine were attacked by a hundred-foot seaweed monster?" or, "What if our space pioneers are taken over by a swarm of tiny robots?"

It may be fine and well for Mr. Allen to continue drawing flies with his conception of science-fiction. It is only when one realizes that Mr. Allen has put more "Sci-Fi" on television than any other producer, and that *none* of his scripts would tax the mentality of a clever poodle, that the suspicion arises that something is wrong here.

Where, amid the plastic dinosaurs, dueling lasers and lusty mutants, is a comment on the inherent limitations of intellect (*2001: a Space Odyssey*)? Where a sober warning of the need of

(Continued on page 17)



A few fantasy/science fiction characters who made it to the small screen successfully: *Lost in Space* with Jonathan Harris, Angela Cartwright, Guy Williams, June Lockhart, Billy Mumy, Mark Goddard and Marta Kristen (back row); *Star Trek's* Shatner, Kelley and Nimoy (center); and two Anne Francis and one James Milhollin from a *Twilight Zone* episode

tion and fantasy lies in the nature of the medium itself. Unlike books, theatrical film, or pay-TV, commercial television does not exist by the direct support of its viewers. Indeed, the viewers are not even the customers; the advertisers are the customers, and the viewers are sold to them in great chunks arranged by age, income, education and ethnic background. Demographics are the only things that matter.

A book can be successful if it sells 30,000 copies, a low budget film if it draws a million viewers. Thus, there is room for innovation, taking chances

opera succeed and there'll be a dozen before the end of the year. In all fairness, the same is true of movie studios, but not since the Forties has the movie industry been the same kind of programmer production-line as the television industry is today. There *must* be sixty-three hours of material a week, and it must draw X tens of millions of viewers to break even.

What happens is that the people who can deliver the numbers, and can deliver the work on schedule, get the jobs. Forget about originality — is it shootable and can we have it Wednes-

Trek, can vary between science fiction ("The City on the Edge of Forever"), amusing fantasy ("The Trouble with Tribbles") and infuriatingly banal brainrot ("The Omega Glory").

Clearly, television executives prefer to stay with worlds they live in, or can read about in history books, or worlds that have no apparent logic. Therefore, of the speculative shows which have appeared on television, better than seventy percent are pure fantasy. And even here, without the restraints of external consistency laid on science fiction, Hollywood seems incapable of