

Sci-Fi on TV

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 technological and moral maturity (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*)?

Let me give you a clue: If it's not in the script, it's not on the screen.

The most successful science fiction shows on television have had writers conversant with both science fiction and screenwriting. *Star Trek* boasted the work of Norman Spinrad, Harlan Ellison, David Gerrold and Ted Sturgeon. *Twilight Zone* had episodes by George Clayton Johnson and Richard Matheson, among others.

But what does it take to keep the kind of control and integrity necessary to win out against the networks? Rod Serling, creator of *Twilight Zone*, fought a constant battle for artistic freedom. He never had much of a budget to work with, but on hundreds of syndicated stations around the world you can see what he *did* get: intelligent, speculative human drama, played amid simple sets. The emphasis was on feeling and thought rather than spectacular makeup or effects. The scripts on *Twilight Zone* dealt with all of William Faulkner's "old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pride and compassion and sacrifice."

every one, depending for effect on human interaction. A staggering number of Hollywood's luminaries passed through the shadowy regions of the *Twilight Zone*: Jack Klugman, Robert Redford, Ivan Dixon, Carol Burnett, Mickey Rooney, and too many more to name. And Serling would never have attracted them without the scripts. Without story, you are left with nothing but spectacle.

Which leads us to the next area:

3) The correct Scope. The presentation must be filmable within the budgetary restraints of a television production.

Many moons ago, filmmakers could swing spaceships on a string, with a sparkler whizzing in the tail, and the kids would go golly-gee. No more. This is the age of motion-control cameras, computer-generated traveling mattes, and slit-scan projection. We are the post-*Star Wars* generation, and we know what good effects look like. You simply cannot do an effects-oriented show on a week-to-week basis without falling into the *Battlestar Galactica* syndrome. Their first episode cost in the neighborhood of \$17 million. Subsequent episodes cost around a million each.

The show was totally effects-oriented, with no leeway in the concept

for Norman's concept of drama. Because of that, when it didn't garner the enormous ratings necessary to pay for the shows, they had nowhere to go—they'd given themselves no room to "get smaller."

But Universal refused to realize when they had an unsalvageable project, full of absurd pseudoscience ("The Cylons are 100 microns away, Captain!") and without a single character thick enough to cast a shadow. So they continued to pump money into it, even after the series flopped altogether. A few more jolts of managerial electricity and this Frankenstein patchwork of dead ideas twitched to life once more as "*Galactica 1980*." This time they shucked most of the effects and settled for a lot of *Wonder Woman*-style stunt work instead.

Fortunately, this monster quickly went down under the torches and pitchforks of the enraged Neilson Families, proving that there are Some Doors Man Was Never Meant to Open.

4) Taste and Discretion. The literature of the Fantastic, by its very nature, violates taboos, stretches boundaries—and makes static thinkers very uncomfortable. With proper care the Censorship restrictions can be overcome, but talent alone will not always suffice.

For instance, virtually all horror programming must be reduced to milkwa-

ter. Watching *Star Trek's* monster-freezing Salem's Lot emasculated into the CBS-TV movie of the same name was a pitiful sight. Not even Tobe Hooper, the director whose *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* sold more Sominex than any other film of 1974, could save this from the ravages of censorship.

The reason? There is a truism in horror and suspense work: you must convince your audience that you mean business. At some point you have to sell some steak with the sizzle, and television won't let you do it. It was painful to watch scene after scene of vampires chomping down on their victims, without once seeing those teeth bite home. I'm no sadist—when it comes to blood I believe that "a little dab'll do ya," but after a while you notice that nothing is really going to happen. The music will blare and people will scream, and you can practically hear the director whining, "Well, gee—aren't we just too scary for words?"

There are rare exceptions to this rule. Richard Matheson's *Duel* and *Trilogy of Terror* (with Karen Black being chased by that godawful doll), *Outer Limits' "The Zanti Misfits," Night Gallery's "The Earwig"* or "*The Dead Man*." These shows are triumphs of craftsmanship on every level, but the excellence began with the writing.

A lesson can be learned from these excursions into the forbidden. Science fiction is often violent, especially towards prejudices. It deals with strange sex, drugs, exotic possibilities for modifying human behavior. These issues simply cannot be handled crudely—the public, and their appointed guardians, will not permit it.

So artists with discretion must arise. Art is self-expression. Successful art is communication. If you have something which cries to be said, it should be heard by the greatest number. Many science fiction writers long to tell their tales through the greatest entertainment medium the world has ever known. Many television producers wish that they could produce speculative shows of value, and wonder why they fail. These two groups must come together.

Science fiction is a literature of imagination, a game for people willing to examine new possibilities, to turn their heads inside out and shake out the lint. It has produced as much *offal* as any other literary genre, but at its best it has new insight and hope to offer, and is the *only* branch of fiction which cares about the future of Mankind, and wonders what we will be the day after tomorrow.

And that makes it something worth working for.



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