

With and Without a Hitch:
Contrasting the Hosts and Hopes Behind
The Twilight Zone
and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*

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Beyond their use as audience thrill rides, horror and suspense do not get much respect as storytelling genres. But like television, a supposed stepsister to theater and film, their artistic worth stems mainly from their content and execution. Two artists, Rod Serling and Alfred Hitchcock, galvanized admiration for those forms with their TV series, *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964, CBS)¹ and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955²–1965, CBS and NBC³). In an irony they might have appreciated, though, based on their backgrounds and their programs' content, style and impact, television playwright Serling's experience in his own medium appears to have been less positive than film director Hitchcock's.

Both men preferred other forms of creative expression. But while Serling initially criticized commercial TV, Hitchcock delightedly embraced it. As Serling's interests zigzagged from novels to radio to scriptwriting,⁴ his stylistic forte emerged through "his ability to write vivid, crackling, if occasionally wordy, dialogue" swiftly. Even as he solidified a grabby voice and rapid pace suitable for TV,⁵ he viewed that medium's commercialism with distaste.⁶ Serling considered theater a more "legitimate" art⁷ and preferred New York's live, one-shot dramas over the West Coast's "hackneyed assembly-line products," as he stated in 1957.⁸ Thus, two years before *The Twilight Zone*, Serling approached the concept of TV serials with cynicism.

His personality contributed to the show's artistic success but also complicated his personal enjoyment of it. Though he sustained the *Zone* through "manic" executive-producing,⁹

¹ Gordon F. Sander, *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television's Last Angry Man* (New York: Dutton, 1992), 42.

² Brian Kelleher and John McCarty, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents: An Illustrated Guide to the Ten-Year Television Career of the Master of Suspense* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴ Gordon F. Sander, *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁸ William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 74-75.

⁹ Gordon F. Sander, *Ibid.*, 168.

his “downright inability to say no” made creative exhaustion a real danger, and vice versa.¹⁰

Though Serling’s “intense, quirky” nature¹¹ helped him spin out unique, provocative stories, his hunger for fame¹² compromised his intentions as a pure artist. Though he once insisted he had “never written beneath [him]self”¹³ even within that ad-heavy medium, his insecurities made him highly sensitive to negative reviews¹⁴ and wobbled his self-esteem. With curious aptness, Serling dealt with—and perhaps made use of—his own sort of tension and terror as his show unleashed the fictional kind.

Hitchcock slid into and endured the anthology series grind more comfortably than Serling did. Hitchcock’s non-TV background actually prepared him for that medium. London University art classes¹⁵ and film work as a title card sketcher¹⁶ honed Hitchcock’s understanding of framing, light and color, which apply to many visual media. Despite his repute in film and his preference for such work,¹⁷ he not only agreed to host a mystery-suspense anthology but also helped producer Joan Harrison run it by ironing script flaws and rubberstamping stories, writers, casting choices and recorded episodes.¹⁸ So far, so like Serling’s deep involvement with *The Twilight Zone*. Unlike Serling, however, Hitchcock further validated his chosen genre, once stating that in England, “crime writing is considered first-class literature. ...I follow in that tradition.”¹⁹ While the TV dramatist downplayed the merits of filmed series, the movie director elevated that form and his attachment to it.

¹⁰ Ibid., 105.

¹¹ Ibid., xix.

¹² Ibid., 128.

¹³ Ibid., 143.

¹⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹⁵ Patrick McGilligan, *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light* (New York: Regan Books, 2003), 27.

¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷ Brian Kelleher and John McCarty, Ibid., 13.

¹⁸ Patrick McGilligan, Ibid., 552.

¹⁹ Peter Brunette, ed., *Alfred Hitchcock: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 167.

Even so, it was Hitchcock's unserious persona that kept *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* agreeable to viewers and for him. With his "outrageous humor,"²⁰ fondness for ironic understatement²¹ and genuinely "avuncular" nature,²² the onscreen Hitchcock seemed edgy yet approachable. As such, this "delightfully macabre host"²³ captured the show's spirit and contributed to its success as something creatively risk-taking *and* popular. Seeing this TV stint as a "lark"²⁴ may have also helped lighten his mental load as he meticulously but economically oversaw production.²⁵ Without the craving for artistic and personal greatness Serling apparently had, Hitchcock could play himself blithely as he toyed with audience expectations.

The Twilight Zone and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*'s differing creative goals and milieus produced a greater irony: dismissal of a message vehicle and respect for a romp. Serling, for one, sought "to menace the public's conscience" as an "agent of change and a spark to controversy"²⁶ during the sociocultural turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s.²⁷ For instance, a neighborhood's descent into "who's the alien?" paranoia in the 1960 *Zone* episode "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street" paralleled the country's anti-Communist hysteria from the previous decade. Serling illustrated such intolerance²⁸ and suburban prejudice repeatedly,²⁹ as well as problems as epic as nuclear war³⁰ or as intimate as humans' moral flaws. Yet because of the series' fantastical elements, from aliens to magic, critics could too easily dismiss the stories as "formula mysteries of the supernatural," as Erik Barnouw did.³¹ Indeed, some of the *Zone*'s most memorable

²⁰ Ibid., xvii.

²¹ Brian Kelleher and John McCarty, Ibid., 15.

²² Peter Brunette, ed., Ibid., 129.

²³ Brian Kelleher and John McCarty, Ibid., 3.

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

²⁵ Ibid., 19.

²⁶ Gordon F. Sander, Ibid., xviii.

²⁷ Ibid., 142.

²⁸ Ibid., 96.

²⁹ Ibid., 115.

³⁰ Ibid., 155.

³¹ William Boddy, Ibid., 193.

episodes, like “It’s a Good Life” about a neighborhood terrorized by a tyrannical, omnipotent boy,³² present freakish extremes. Though reviewers and ratings did boost the show,³³ its genre’s inherent bizarreness sometimes overshadowed the stories’ substance—a circumstance that could not have pleased Serling.

The *Zone*’s distinctive style and presentation also threatened to lash him to merely creepy curiosities. Not that his narratives were ineffective. His use of “parable and suggestion”³⁴ dressed up his moral and social critiques as more palatable sci-fi entertainment that, once understood, became ever more eye-opening. For example, the episode “Eye of the Beholder” addressed the arbitrariness of physical acceptability by revealing an “ugly” woman to be beautiful (to viewers) and her “beholders” as pug-faced monsters. Serling’s precise, up-ticking notches of suspense,³⁵ like William Shatner’s constant glimpses of a monster on a plane wing and deteriorating sanity in “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet,” disturbed viewers effectively via their own confused anticipation. And the “weird, but believable or *almost* believable” twist endings³⁶ snapped viewers into realizations that, though often horrific like the human cookbook of “To Serve Man,” were pleasingly logical and cathartic. Such calculated narrative tricks, however, ultimately pigeonholed Serling’s talents. Lackluster early ratings led CBS to seek a “charismatic and enigmatic ‘host’—like Alfred Hitchcock, who had become an icon hosting *his* anthology show... —as a means of tying [*The Twilight Zone*’s] disparate episodes together.”³⁷ Already, the network was turning Serling’s vision into just another wry, morbid show with an eerie emcee. Second-season additions like the hypnotic theme music, dreamlike credit sequence and Serling’s opening

³² Gordon F. Sander, *Ibid.*, 182.

³³ *Ibid.*, 151.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

introduction to “another dimension”³⁸ typecast him further as a sci-fi/horror maven. Even his unassuming onscreen appearances to button teasers seemed to viewers “every bit as weird—and fitting—for *The Twilight Zone* as Hitchcock had been for his show.”³⁹ As flattering as that assessment was, it rendered Serling, the award-winning TV playwright and provocateur, a peripheral oddity, and a derivative one at that.

Hitchcock, whose series ambitions were not as weighty as Serling’s, nonetheless maintained the “artistic” credentials Serling would have wanted. Much like the *Zone*, *Presents* featured “tales of mystery and suspense, horror and the supernatural, the ironic and outright fantastic, and even the socially relevant.”⁴⁰ As McCarty and Kelleher’s statement implies, though, the message tales were more like afterthoughts than the crux of the show. Granted, it later deepened its content to address “the artificiality, hypocrisy, neuroses, violence, and evil” within American society.⁴¹ But its calling card remained “murder under suspicious or peculiar circumstances,”⁴² “polite and wholesome mayhem” perpetrated by “amateurs.”⁴³ Whether terrifying like the ventriloquist-dummy reveal of “The Glass Eye”⁴⁴ or darkly humorous like the frozen-meat murder of “Lamb to the Slaughter,” the episodes aimed to scare and/or amuse. It was an “enjoyment of fear”⁴⁵ that Hitchcock’s audience had come to expect from his films and not much more or less.

But even with suspense for its own sake, the pedigree behind *Presents* was often impressive. Stories came from the likes of Roald Dahl, H.G. Wells and Ray Bradbury;⁴⁶

³⁸ Ibid., 158.

³⁹ Ibid., 159.

⁴⁰ Brian Kelleher and John McCarty, Ibid., 3.

⁴¹ Patrick McGilligan, Ibid., 581.

⁴² Ibid., 523.

⁴³ Peter Brunette, ed., Ibid., 160.

⁴⁴ Brian Kelleher and John McCarty, Ibid., 112-113.

⁴⁵ Peter Brunette, ed., Ibid., 160.

⁴⁶ Patrick McGilligan, Ibid., 523.

performances from Charles Bronson, Barbara Bel Geddes, Joseph Cotten and Claude Rains;⁴⁷ and direction from veterans like Robert Stevenson (who would direct *The Twilight Zone*'s pilot),⁴⁸ Ida Lupino and rising stars Robert Altman and William Friedkin.⁴⁹ Though Hitchcock famously relied on pre-published tales,⁵⁰ under his and his contributors' influence, his episodes seemed not derivative or simply strange but rich in style if not always substance.

While *Presents*, like the *Zone*, did rely on formulas, Hitchcock did not let them box in his reputation as much as they did Serling's. Although the anthology had its standard opening music, titles and host greeting, the James Allardice-written monologues and sketches let Hitchcock run the gamut from "low comedy" to "extremely witty" commentary. Visual gags included the host in a Jack-in-the-box, wearing sausage links around his waist or dressed as a Beatle.⁵¹ Yet critics could not write off this freewheeling silliness outright because those lead-ins and lead-outs also let Hitchcock make a more serious move: the skewering of sponsors. A remark like, "Tonight's story is about a man named Perry and follows after a minute called *tedious*,"⁵² clearly insults the advertisers. These moments earned each sponsor popular good will as a good sport,⁵³ but their audacity was unmistakable. They represented the show's own brand of anti-commercial risk-taking. Moreover, the recurring twist endings (often a criminal's escape from punishment) came with their own twist: an offscreen fate for the culprit even more diabolical than what viewers witnessed.⁵⁴ In "Lamb to the Slaughter," Mary's unseen attempt to kill another husband with a meat club—and her capture because it was "soft as jelly"⁵⁵—exemplified Hitchcock's way of

⁴⁷ *Alfred Hitchcock Presents: A Look Back* (class screening, Boston University, 10 April 2006).

⁴⁸ Brian Kelleher and John McCarty, *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁹ Patrick McGilligan, *Ibid.*, 526.

⁵⁰ Brian Kelleher and John McCarty, *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 38-40.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁵⁵ "Lamb to the Slaughter," *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (class screening, Boston University, 10 April 2006).

both assuaging and thumbing his nose at censors loath to see bad guys win. When *Presents* doubled its tight half-hour length as *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* in 1962, the threat of burning out plot-wise in the longer format faded under the chance to delve into more psychological character dynamics.⁵⁶ Thus, neither routine narrative elements nor network-proposed changes kept Hitchcock from flexing his creative muscles. Unlike Serling, whose grander symbolism could get lost in his supernatural arena, Hitchcock's work was more properly valued as he basked in the banality of crime.

Decades later, both men remain widely admired. But while Hitchcock's mainstream legacy transcends his television work, Serling's is synonymous with one thing: his signature show, one that is readily parodied. Recent spoofs include *The Simpsons*'s "Treehouse of Horror" Halloween specials, like "Bart the Monster" (based on "It's a Good Life") and "Hungry Are the Damned" (inspired by "To Serve Man").⁵⁷ The theme music and Serling's distinctive diction have become oft-mimicked cues for weirdness. Still, these imitations represent flattery more than mockery. The show popularized the phrase "twilight zone," meaning a hazy ethical limbo or a realm of illusion.⁵⁸ A feature film and two series revivals have appeared in its wake.⁵⁹ And the original program's episodes are still staples of the Sci-Fi Channel's holiday marathons.⁶⁰ Although images of Serling today more often float before spiraling doors and eyeballs than a corporate building from *Patterns* or a boxing ring from *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, *The*

⁵⁶ Brian Kelleher and John McCarty, *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁷ "Treehouse of Horror—The Simpsons Halloween Specials," *The Lair of Phobos & Deimos*, http://www.phobos-deimos.com/Treehouse_Of_Horror/Treehouse%20Of%20Horror.htm.

⁵⁸ "twilight zone," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=twilight%20zone&query=twilight%20zone>.

⁵⁹ "twilight zone," *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/find?s=tt&q=twilight+zone>.

⁶⁰ Eric M. Burke, "Twilight Zone Marathons on the Sci Fi Marathon," *Twilight Zone World*, <http://www.tzworld.com/marathons.html>.

Twilight Zone has become a solid cultural “institution.”⁶¹ Years after his death in 1975, it continues to win him the fame and creative (if not socially serious) respect he desired in life.

Perhaps because its host already thrived in film or its goals were less daring than the *Zone*'s, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* had greater impact on Hitchcock's career than on the TV landscape. Charles Gounod's deliberate but carnivalesque “Funeral March of a Marionette” and Hitchcock's hand-sketched profile⁶² still signal grinning grotesqueries to come. But few anthologies besides *The Twilight Zone* immediately sustained that tradition.⁶³ What did endure was Hitchcock's global popularity, which increased exponentially thanks to his TV series.⁶⁴ Greater celebrity must have given him vaster opportunities to make more of his true love—films—and that productivity and talent have earned him a place in the cinematic pantheon. Hitchcock's television “lark” seems to have won him broader, gauzier admiration than Serling's nobler, out-of-this-world intentions.

The different levels of reverence that Rod Serling and Alfred Hitchcock's anthologies gave them might relate back to TV's stepsister status. But at least, in their own ways on their own suspense/horror shows, both men proved that medium's stimulating and stylish possibilities—a medium, to paraphrase Serling, “not only of sight and sound, but of mind.”⁶⁵ It is a lesson in imagination and boldness that TV students would do well to absorb.

⁶¹ Gordon F. Sander, *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶² Brian Kelleher and John McCarty, *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁵ Gordon F. Sander, *Ibid.*, 158.

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