



# Spaceships and Politics

The Political Theory of Rod Serling

Leslie Dale Feldman

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LEXINGTON BOOKS

A division of

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

*Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK*

Published by Lexington Books

A division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706

<http://www.lexingtonbooks.com>

Estover Road, Plymouth PL6 7PY, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Feldman, Leslie Dale.

Spaceships and politics : the political theory of Rod Serling / Leslie Dale Feldman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.


ISBN 978-0-7391-2044-6 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-7391-2045-3 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-7391-5050-4 (electronic)

1. Twilight zone (Television program : 1959-1964) 2. Serling, Rod, 1924-1975—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PN1992.77.T87F45 2010

791.45'72--dc22

2010022527

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

To My Parents



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## Preface

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**H**OW DO WE THINK ABOUT HUMAN nature, the individual and the state, dictatorship and democracy? What is the individual's place in the political order?

For Rod Serling all of these things were part of how we think about life on this planet. In *The Twilight Zone*, Serling considers all aspects of human nature and politics, often a reflection of the politics of the time—the Cold War, conformity, nuclear war and post-industrial technological society—in the setting of aliens and other planets but the messages are political.

Serling was a student of human nature using fantasy and the supernatural to illustrate political ideas. As JFK said in a 1963 speech at American University, discussing the U.S. and the USSR, “we all inhabit this small planet,” and, for Serling, that planet is the vehicle to study our place in the universe and the role of the individual and the state.

Rod Serling was perhaps television's most brilliant writer and his work includes a vast compendium of creative dramas and teleplays. This book will consider the work for which he is most famous, his masterpiece of creative thinking, *The Twilight Zone*, and the political themes for which it is famous, using mainly those shows written by Rod Serling.



# Acknowledgments

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I WOULD LIKE TO THANK HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY for granting me a sabbatical to complete this work. Thanks to President Stuart Rabinowitz, Provost Herman Berliner, Dean Bernard Firestone of Hofstra College of Liberal Arts, Prof. Emeritus Mark Landis and Rosanna Perotti, Chair of the Political Science department for providing research resources and time with which to use them. Michelle Wu of Hofstra Law School provided valuable advice, as did Rob Tempio of Princeton University Press. Mark Labaton provided advice and support which is greatly appreciated.

I wish to thank the many faculty members who have encouraged me, including Werner Dannhauser, Isaac Kramnick, Jeremy Rabkin and Woody Kelley of Cornell, Alan Ryan of Oxford and Princeton, and Bertell Ollman and H. Mark Roelofs of New York University. Bertell Ollman's book *Alienation* was particularly useful for this study. Special thanks to David Theodosopoulos and Roni Mueller at CBS for their kind consideration. The work could not have come to fruition without their help and it is greatly appreciated. Thanks also to Joseph Parry, Erin Walpole, Alden Perkins, and Paula Durbin-Westby of Lexington Books. Two resources that were also invaluable are Marc Scott Zicree's *Twilight Zone Companion* and Gordon Sander's *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television's Last Angry Man*. The Paley Center in Los Angeles was a superb resource and a treasure trove for research. Thanks also to Lawrence M. Krauss and Noel Carroll and Jodi Dean, Robert Lincoln, Steve Satz, Yvette Marqueen, and Maria at the LA County Library in Santa Monica.

My friends at the post office, Gene, Mary, Sung and Kevin, were congenial and supportive, which I appreciated. Many thanks to Gene Martone for the Rod Serling stamps.

Thanks to Eunemone and Simona Fordyce for identifying “Spring Song” in “Miniature,” “Romeo and Juliet Overture” in “The Chaser,” “The Anvil Chorus” in “Once Upon a Time,” and “The Emperor Waltz” in “The After Hours.” In addition, Peter Molesso was an early inspiration who encouraged me to write this work, Bob Hymes escorted me to the Paley Center in Los Angeles, Mary Starke was a source of support, as were Ginny Greenberg, Miguel Pozo, Chris Vaccaro, Sheryl Perry, Wigberto Serpa, Maria Figueroa, Kaytee Lozier, a fellow *Twilight Zone* fan, Martine and Bongo, Dukie, and Tuffy and Lola.

Robert Greenberg, Esq., has been a generous source of support and encouragement, humor and advice for which I am very grateful. He helped this work come to fruition with his guidance, enthusiasm and friendship. He has been a wonderful and loyal friend and it is only with his encouragement that I was able to persevere.

I wish to thank my parents, Simon and Phoebe Feldman, for their love and support. Their advice has been the hedge that has kept me in my way. This book would not have been written without their constant support, patience, finely-honed editorial, negotiating and managerial skills, and selfless devotion, a gift I could not have asked for but am grateful to have received. Words cannot express my profound thanks, gratitude, appreciation, admiration and love.

I wish to thank Dr. Clifford Feldman and Dr. Tina Verder for their tremendous effort on behalf of this work which could not have been completed without them. The time and energy they put into seeing this work completed is greatly appreciated, as is their undaunted work, time and energy on my behalf. Jacob and Sam Feldman were similarly supportive and enthusiastic about the work, especially when we watched the marathons and on the (miniature) golf course. Ditto S and K.

Susan Kleinman has been a great source of support and encouragement without which this work could not have been completed. Her thoughts and suggestions helped provide needed inspiration and she was an enthusiastic research assistant who rescued me—thanks for being my parachute. Thanks also to Bradley and Stefanie Kleinman for their enthusiastic support.

Thanks to Sir Bongo Igitur (commonly known as “Iggy”) Wickersham whose undying efforts to worm his way methodically through mountains of literature helped me establish the roots of this opus.

Finally, thanks to Rod Serling for continuing to make us think about our politics and our planet.

## Introduction

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ROD SERLING WAS RANKED #1 IN *TV Guide's* list of the 25 Greatest Sci-Fi Legends.<sup>1</sup> But his writing was more than science fiction, it was also political theory. When asked about the Iranian president's visit to the United Nations, former ambassador John Bolton said, "You should treat this as an off Broadway production," and he described the UN as a "Twilight Zone."<sup>2</sup> Ambassador Bolton was on to something. When I was in graduate school friends would never let me watch *The Twilight Zone*. *The Twilight Zone* was my favorite television show and I had to sneak to watch it. I couldn't figure out why, but they simply did not approve. "It's scary" they said. Rod Serling's vision of humanity—for that is what he portrays in *The Twilight Zone*, even as he uses aliens and beings from other worlds to do it—has a nasty edge to it. The edge, and the nasty glimpse of humanity, have decided Hobbesian qualities. Though Serling was writing worlds away in time and place from Thomas Hobbes (who wrote in seventeenth century England) he managed to infuse *The Twilight Zone* with much of Hobbesian "nastiness." According to *Webster's* twilight refers to "a state of imperfect clarity, of dubiety, indefiniteness or indistinctness, of . . . darkness or gloom."

Examples of the nastiness and depressing and violent nature of humans abound in such episodes as "To Serve Man," "Time Enough at Last," "The Monsters are due on Maple Street," "People Are Alike All Over," "The Shelter," etc. which are infused with a vision of humanity that, to Hobbes, was "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish . . ." and to Serling if not poor then solitary, nasty and brutish. Many of Serling's visions are violent and he is often preoccupied with nuclear holocaust which is featured in several shows such as "The Shelter" and

“Time Enough at Last.” Included in the catalogue of violence is a man getting run over by a car (“What You Need”) a man running a boy over with a car (“You Drive”) several shows where people jump or are thrown out of windows (“Perchance to Dream,” “The Fever,” “A Most Unusual Camera,” “What’s In the Box?”) and one where a man commits suicide by jumping from a train (“A Stop at Willoughby”).

There are executions, a man who is chased into a pool by his machines (“The Trouble with Machines”), a man who is paralyzed by the devil (“The Howling Man”), a man who murders his fellow bank robber (“Rip Van Winkle Caper”), a man who slits his own throat (“The Silence”), a man who is pinned to a grave, a man whose head is cut off and put on a jack in the box (“It’s a Good Life”), a man who is dinner for a hungry alien (“To Serve Man”), a man who is shot by a Mexican police officer even though he has a cure for cancer (“The Gift”), a man who shoots his daughter’s boyfriend after he sells him his compassion (“The Self Improvement of Salvadore Ross”), a fading movie star who stays young by turning journalists to dust (“Queen of the Nile”), a ventriloquist who is turned into a puppet by his dummy (“The Dummy”), a man who pushes his wife off the roof (“Escape Clause”), and a man who is killed by a doll (“Living Doll”).

Why, according to Serling, is violence and nastiness the thematic thread that connects both aliens and Earth dwellers and that characterizes the human (and alien) condition? To understand this we must understand the importance of the concept of fear and how it is used in *The Twilight Zone*. The concept of fear is an important political concept dating from the origin of power. As Machiavelli famously said “it is better to be feared than loved.” The political philosopher who, perhaps more than anyone else, understood the importance of fear to power and politics and in human relations was Thomas Hobbes.

For Hobbes, humans are motivated by “diffidence” or fear—fear of each other primarily that drives them to form societies and governments for the purpose of protection. Fear is a great human motivator and protection a great need. But more than this, humans are acquisitive and belligerent. They are violent and self-serving. Serling agreed.

Serling clearly had something of the Hobbesian dark side to his personality. On a Dick Cavett show in response to the host mentioning a *TV Guide* article on Serling which described him as depressed Serling replied “I read it and didn’t realize it was about me. . . . I’m not depressed” and then jokes “I’m hanging myself on a lamppost right after the show.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly Serling had a fascination with politics, in the same show remarking to a news reporter “you now qualify as a science fiction personality, you’ve been to a political convention and that’s about as bizarre as you can get.”

Serling's negative worldview is clearly expressed in *The Twilight Zone*. Those who are treated inhumanely treat others inhumanely—and even those who are treated humanely treat others inhumanely (“It’s a Good Life” comes to mind) This twilight landscape of gray to black can be seen in a variety of episodes including “The Eye of the Beholder,” “A Most Unusual Camera,” “Dust,” “The Rip Van Winkle Caper,” “To Serve Man,” and many others. Humans are seen as frightened, subject to the fear instilled by the state and by other people, as well as self interested, greedy and willing to believe the worst about others. These character traits are often reflected in the aliens that populate *The Twilight Zone*.

Serling takes up other themes of Hobbes, notably the modern capitalist “rat race” the race for social mobility or “race of life.” In these episodes (including “The Bewitchin’ Pool,” “A Stop at Willoughby,” “Uncle Simon,” “The Masks”) the race for social mobility is seen as shallow and often destructive. Social mobility and wealth are achieved at the price of peace of mind, peace and quiet, values and decency. Frequently in these episodes Serling shows glimpses of happy simpler days that hark back to the nineteenth century before society became so competitive, shallow and materialistic. In at least one episode (“The Bewitchin’ Pool”) a swimming pool is used as the Hollywood symbol of glittery shallowness (note: this episode, written by Earl Hamner, Jr., incorporates his themes very well).

Like Hobbes, Serling has a mechanistic view of the world. Often he pictures man as machine or, as Hobbes said, “automata” which for Hobbes was “but a motion of limbs.” Additionally, Serling pictures man struggling with machines or men and women as robots. These episodes include “I Sing the Body Electric”—where a family hires a robot nanny, “Steel”—where boxers are robots, “Uncle Simon”—where a rich man becomes a robot, “The Lonely”—where a man who is banished to another planet has a robot girlfriend, “The Mighty Casey”—where a baseball player is a robot, “The Lateness of the Hour”—where a daughter is a robot, “From Agnes with Love”—where a computer falls in love with a man, “A Thing about Machines”—where a man is hounded by machines and run over by a car that drives itself, “The After Hours”—where mannequins are people, and “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” where a manager is replaced by a robot who has his mannerisms.

Serling's *Twilight Zone* expresses the frustrations with modern life and particularly the monotony and conformity of mass culture which play on man's aggressive and belligerent nature. In themes that are reminiscent of De Tocqueville Serling denounces conformity of thought, word and dress, the need to look and think alike that accompanies contemporary bourgeois society. In a very famous *Twilight Zone* episode, “The Eye of the Beholder,”



shadowy figures in a hospital take care of a patient whose head is swathed in bandages. She has had plastic surgery to improve her appearance because it is unacceptable. But when the bandages are taken off, and the doctor drops his knife for dramatic effect, we see that she is beautiful and the doctors and nurses are deformed. The point is that the patient (Donna Douglas from *The Beverly Hillbillies*) doesn't conform in a society (like our own?) that prizes conformity. To reinforce this theme a dictator is shown on state television promoting the value of "one idea, one truth, one ideology" and presumably one appearance.

"Lookism" and "ageism" are considered, usually in the context of a fascist communal state where everyone must look alike and individualism is not rewarded. "Eye of the Beholder" is the most famous of these episodes, but it is also considered in "Mr. Bevis," "A Short Drink From a Certain Fountain" and "The Trade Ins." Such episodes as "Eye of the Beholder," "The Obsolete Man," "It's a Good Life," "Number Twelve Looks Just Like You" emphasize the dissatisfaction with mass culture and modern, bourgeois conformity—of thought, word, deed and looks—that was becoming part of life as Serling knew it. In "Number Twelve Looks Just Like You" Serling envisions a world in which everyone is compelled to have plastic surgery to look good. When you reach a certain age you must pick out the model that you want to look like from a catalogue which, presumably, is set up by the state. Hobbes said "Nature hath made men so equal" but here the state comes in to equalize them—even in terms of looks.

Perhaps this critique of conformity was Serling's way of indicating that, though he moved to Hollywood, he hadn't sold out his values of decency and social commitment. "Be Ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." The Horace Mann quote was the motto of Antioch College, Serling's alma mater, and was featured in a *Twilight Zone* episode called "The Changing of the Guard" in which Ellis Fowler, an elderly teacher at a school for boys, believes his efforts have not amounted to anything.<sup>4</sup> Did Serling see himself as Ellis Fowler? What was Serling's victory for mankind? Perhaps this was a concern for him considering the Antioch College mission of social activism and liberal values. *The Twilight Zone* was a safe way for Serling to communicate social and political messages while flying under the radar of the censors and remaining superficially uncontroversial. Science fiction was the perfect venue as it could hardly be considered controversial.

The social and political themes in *The Twilight Zone* include: fascism, racism, capital punishment, ageism, lookism, the individual against the state, tyranny, dictatorship. Just as professor Ellis Fowler won a victory for mankind by teaching students values that helped them win a war, perhaps Rod Serling thought he had won a victory for mankind by portraying his political

ideas—the triumph of the individual, opposition to competition and capital punishment in the guise of popular culture and science fiction.

For Hobbes, humans were motivated by “diffidence” or fear. Fear has been seen during many times in American history including fear of anarchists, “the red scare,” and the war on terror. Serling recognized that governments can harness this fear and deploy it to increase the power of the state. *Twilight Zone* episodes including “The Fear,” “The Monsters Are Due on Maple St.” and “The Shelter” play on this theme of the use of fear by governments, and sometimes aliens, to enhance power.

Serling, like Hobbes, understood that humans are only civilized under the threat of compulsion because they are by nature violent and only understand the threat of violence. If the world is going to blow up and there is a breakdown in order humans revert to their natural state—belligerent, acquisitive, and violent. As Hobbes said “if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies and in the way to their end . . . endeavour to destroy or subdue one another . . . and from this diffidence of one another there is no way for any man to secure himself. . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Serling particularly dislikes discrimination and associates it with fear of others: “there are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices to be found only in the minds of men. Prejudices can kill and suspicion can destroy. And a thoughtless frightened search for a scapegoat has a fallout all its own. And the pity of it is that these things cannot be confined to *The Twilight Zone*.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, “It’s A Good Life” explains how people tyrannize themselves through the use of fear and how violence reinforces it.<sup>7</sup>

The introduction of “Five Characters in Search of an Exit” says “Five improbable entities stuck together into a pit of darkness. No logic, no reason, no explanation, just a prolonged nightmare in which fear, loneliness and the unexplainable walk hand in hand. . . .” The episodes “Dust” and “The Gift” consider racism. In “Dust” a Mexican man is to be hung. In “The Gift” a visitor to a Mexican town is thought to be an alien and killed—even though he brings a “vaccine for all kinds of cancer.” At the end of “The Gift” Serling’s voiceover says “Madeiro, Mexico. The present. The subject: fear. The cure: a little more faith. An Rx off the shelf, in *The Twilight Zone*.” And at the end of “No Time Like the Past” Serling quotes a poet named Lathbury: “children of yesterday, heirs of tomorrow, what are you weaving? Labor and sorrow.”

Fear, loneliness and isolation play powerfully into Serling’s worldview. Ultimately, everyone is isolated and alone. The concept of community is a veneer—if you scratch the surface it’s a fiction. In “People are Alike All Over” Serling makes the point that people or aliens on other planets need to have “outsiders” to stigmatize and feel superior to. “The Lonely” is set on another planet where a prisoner, played by Jack Warden, is sent to a modern

day Siberia. He becomes so lonely that he befriends a robot in the shape of a female, and then wants to take her with him when he is “sprung.” “The Changing of the Guard,” “The Hitchhiker,” “Time Enough at Last,” all echo this theme of isolation and alienation. Yet, perhaps isolation is preferable to the violence of humans. “Elegy” is a place where there are no humans because, to quote the character Jeremy Wickwire “there can be no peace” until there are no humans. Similarly, the character in “The Mind and the Matter” voices the opinion that “people are pigs.”

Serling likes to play with the theme of weak v. powerful or “big v. small” in such episodes as “The Invaders” and “The Little People.” Just as beauty is a relative term, power is a relative term. You are powerful in a world of “little people”—until someone bigger than you comes along and steps on you. This theme of “big v. small” is also explored in “The Invaders” (with Agnes Moorehead) and “Stopover in a Quiet Town” in which humans are stuck in the doll house of a child from another planet.

For Serling, community in contemporary society is a false illusion. We are not a society, but a collection of individuals each pursuing its own self-interest often in competition with others for scarce resources. For Hobbes, people made up a social contract and agreed to establish a society with laws based on self interest and modern liberal democracy was not a community—but a collection of individuals who had agreed to establish a society so that each would be protected. In a society based on self interest there is no community and this theme is seen in episodes such as “The Monsters are Due on Maple Street,” “The Rip Van Winkle Caper,” “The Midnight Sun” where individuals compete in a “war of all v. all” scenario.

In “The Midnight Sun” Serling imagines the two extremes—heat and cold—that the Earth is either getting too close to the sun or too far away. So people will either burn up or freeze. In this chaos, in which Serling perhaps anticipates global warming, and nuclear winter, the actress Lois Nettleton is sweating and looking for scarce resources, particularly water. This is the Hobbesian nasty and brutish “state of nature” the so called “war of all against all” where individuals show their true nature. Serling frequently focuses on this theme in the context of nuclear war where either the totalitarian state or people are instilling fear.

What does Serling expect of people in these situations—fascism, totalitarianism, racism and fear? Is Serling an optimist and does he believe democracy can prevent the scenarios of *The Twilight Zone*? Is the modern mechanistic world superficial and materialistic or can it still uphold the values espoused by Horace Mann?

Fascism is considered in episodes such as “On Thursday We Leave for Home,” “Deaths-Head Revisited,” “It’s a Good Life.” These typically feature an

unlikely dictator, such as Billy Mummy in "It's a Good Life" and a heroic leader in "On Thursday" who wants to lead his followers who have been stranded on another planet even after their rescue.

Billy Mummy plays a little boy who dictates to the residents of a Midwestern American town. Because they are afraid of him they dance to his tune, or don't dance as is the case. He does not allow singing and there is only one television station. When one resident protests he is turned into a jack-in-the-box and put in the cornfield. In "Four O'Clock" a man who would turn all the people he doesn't like into little people himself turns into one at four o'clock. "The Mirror" and "Deaths-Head Revisited" consider this in a more obvious political way with Nazis and communist dictators.

Racism and prejudice are also considered in "He's Alive" and "No Time Like the Past."

The individual against the state is a theme that comes up frequently and is the theme of such episodes as "The Obsolete Man," "It's a Good Life," "The Little People." This theme is also seen as individuals against aliens in "To Serve Man," "The Fear," "People Are Alike All Over." Considering many of these shows were written during the cold war the aliens could represent communists. In "The Fear" Americans stand up to an inflated alien (communists?) and "The Whole Truth" is about JFK, the Soviets and a used car salesman selling a car that makes you tell the truth.

What about democracy? Does Serling see a place for it or are humans too ruthless and competitive to participate in democracy? Are there any optimistic episodes in *The Twilight Zone*? Serling considers nuclear holocaust in at least six ("One More Pallbearer," "The Shelter," "Time Enough at Last," "Probe 7," "Two," and "Third from the Sun") episodes and optimistic episodes are not plentiful. "One for the Angels," "The Changing of the Guard," and "The Fear" can be considered optimistic. But does Serling ever consider democracy as a good system? Perhaps in "On Thursday We Leave for Home" democracy and individualism are seen as good. And, for Serling, the individual standing up to the state is good in "The Obsolete Man."

But more often modern bourgeois society is seen as promoting materialist values that do not make for better people or a good society. Images such as swimming pools, cars, money and servants, mirrors and mansions reinforce the vast emptiness of wealth and loneliness of contemporary society. Rich people are not depicted as generous but as scheming and duplicitous. Examples include "A Stop at Willoughby" (Gart's wife Janie is an example of the empty materialist), "A Thing about Machines" (Mr. Finchley is haughty), "Uncle Simon" (a dictator), "The Silence" (a man pretending to be rich makes a greedy man slit his throat), and "The Masks" (a rich man takes revenge on his haughty relatives). Those episodes not written by Serling