PHILOSOPHY IN
THE TWILIGHT ZONE

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Fever"), panic ("The Shelter"), obsessive devotion to an ill-conceived cause ("The New Exhibit," "Alone at Last"), or, as here, simply the drive to do something. The Major is to a degree reminiscent of "the man of action," reviled by the Underground Man in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's "Notes from Underground." See Notes from Underground and The Double, trans. Jessie Coulson (New York: Penguin, 1972).

11. "Death Ship" is one of several episodes that contain military figures who are men of action and who have sublime faith in their own judgment, even though later judgments contradict earlier ones, and even though sometimes they shift back again. This "eternal return," dramatized especially clearly in "Death Ship," is more reminiscent of Nietzsche than anticipatory of postmodernism.

12. Contrast Sartre's view that consciousness "must necessarily be what it is not and not be what it is," Being and Nothingness, p. 74.

13. "The Purple Testament" is one episode where knowing the future does make it possible to do something meaningful.

14. In the television special on Rod Serling's life, his wife said that, more than a decade after the war, he was still having nightmares about it, and that "the War was always with him."

15. There are cases, however, where characters are good and do not have to struggle, as with Jimbo Cobb (Buddy Ebsen) in "The Prime Mover." In Serling's voice-over, he describes him as "a man who thinks, and thereby gets things done."

16. Walter Ryder describes his situation as "sort of a reverse Jekyll and Hyde." A comparison with Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is also appropriate, where it is Frankenstein's monster, rather than the scientist, which (or is it "who"?) seeks, unsuccessfully, to establish contact with other people.


The classic television series The Twilight Zone had the unusual feature of addressing pressing social issues, often with existential reflections reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre's "The Wall," where irony always awaited the at times shocking climax of each episode. Among those pressing concerns are race and racism, in ways that are not often explicit. Unlike many series of the day, which required the appearance of blacks (if they appear at all) as the blacks, the series examined themes in ways that brought contingency to the lives of its black characters. This is particularly evident in episode 27, "The Big Tall Wish" (1960), of the first season. It features a little boy who transforms reality through the Promethean energy and faith he puts into his wishes. His efforts come to bear on the outcome of a fight by his best friend and hero, Bolie Jackson, a boxer who was supposed to have lost a fight because of his injured hand. Jackson was knocked down. The referee began to count. The boy, Henry, listening to the fight, wished, with the intensity of prayer, for Jackson to win the fight. The referee held up Jackson's hand, declaring him the winner. Jackson's opponent was on the floor, knocked out, and Jackson's injured hand was fine, as if it were never damaged. All was good. Later on, while celebrating Jackson's
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victory. Henry confessed his wish. Jackson became indignant and insisted
that it was he who secured his own victory (although the memory of hav-
ing injured his hand while preparing for the fight still lingers). He urged
Henry to stop relying on the power of wishes. Henry repeatedly refused,
until Jackson gave him a speech about the dangers of believing in wish-
ing and of how foolish he was being. As Henry takes in and begins to
accept Jackson's argument, he grows solemn as his faith in wishes dis-
appears, and both return from that other, possible world of their ideal,
the world in which Jackson won the fight, to the actual one, with Jackson
unable to rise from the canvas after being knocked down, in which it was
not only wishes that were lost. In this, actual world, Henry tried but
witnessed the "failure" of his wish, ceased to believe in wishes, and began
proverbially to grow up. Rod Serling's closing narration to this episode
is rich with many levels of reflection:

Mr. Bolie Jackson, a hundred and eighty-three pounds, who left a second chance
lying in a heap on a rosin-splattered canvas at St. Nick's Arena. Mr. Bolie Jackson,
who shares the most common ailment of all men, the strange and perverse
disinclination to believe in a miracle, the kind of miracle to come from the
mind of a little boy, perhaps only to be found in the Twilight Zone.

Serling here speaks to the audience at multiple levels. The cast from
that episode was black. Although no signifier save the color of the actors' skin
and the inflections of their speech pointed to race as the main point of
the episode, it was an unmistakable feature for audiences of 1960, who
were living through the immediate, painful efforts at integration where
black children were accompanied by the National Guard to formerly all-
white schools after Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. Serling,
however, did more than hire a cast of black actors. The episode exem-
plified several considerations that were ahead of their time. Why did he
use a black cast for all but the boxing scene (where white actors played
Jackson's trainer and the boxer who knocked him down) when progres-
sive politics favored mixed settings or were at least exploring such ques-
tions as attested to by the later Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967), which
examined interracial marriage with Sidney Poitier as the black man
proposing to marry the hypocritical liberal's white daughter. Serling's episode
posed a challenge to the question of audience. On the one hand, he brought
black people into the lives of television viewers as something unfamiliar
to visual popular culture: black human beings. On the other, he seemed
to have realized that the presumption of a white-only audience, or of whites

as audience, limited the humanity of blacks through closing off their
perspectival possibilities. The closing narrative, I suggest, addressed the
twopeness of American society by speaking to blacks directly both through
the intratextual theme of the consequence of no longer believing in
wishes and the extratextual reality of social justice in America as what
Drucilla Cornell (2004) has characterized as an ideal to be defended. The
episode offered an intergenerational question between the adult fighters
of the civil rights struggle and the generation for whom they fought. Serling
portended the danger of lost ideals, where, like Daedalus' admonition to
Icarus, a generation of blacks whose expectations flew too high fell to
despair as dreams, wishes, and hopes melted away. That Cornel West wrote
about "Nihilism in the Black Community" three decades after "The Big
Tall Wish" reveals the prescience of Serling's political-aesthetic critique.
Moving to 2008, the Barack Obama campaign's rhetoric of "Yes, we can!"
and the many boxing metaphors in the Democratic Primary competition
between him and Hillary Clinton exemplify an almost eerie return of these
themes that suggest a teleological grammar to intergenerational challenges
of racial upliftment.

Portraying black people as people is not an easy task. W. E. B. Du Bois
(1898a and b, 1903) reflected on this matter at the dawn of the twentieth
century through a series of essays on problem people. Such people, he
observed, are treated by American society and those who study it as the
cause of their afflictions instead of as people upon whom suffering and
injustice fall. This tendency affects how such people see themselves as
well. They become the Groucho Marx joke of rejecting the conditions of
their acceptance – that is, preferring not to be members of a club that
would accept people like them. For such blacks, the role of the anonym-
ous television viewer, who is often presumed to be white, is also theirs.
Returning to the 1960 broadcast of "The Big Tall Wish," the image of
black human beings on the screen must have been, for many black
people, although at first a source of celebration and pride, surreal.

It is not always the case that race is examined through blacks. A log-
ical consequence of racial differentiation is the notion that, if pushed to
its extreme, it leads to species difference. Pushed further, the difference
could become extraterrestrial. A poignant episode in the third season, "To
Serve Man" (1962), which Serling adapted from Damon Knight's 1951 short
story bearing the same title, presented a set of aliens, the Kanamits, who,
after solving problems of famine and disease on earth, offered to take
cargos of human beings to their world among the stars. Thought by the
humans to be god-sent servants because of the aliens' book To Serve Man,
many earthlings eagerly boarded the space ships. The climax of the episode was the realization that “cargo” is the right word since To Serve Man was a cookbook and the passengers were being harvested for food. From a race theoretical perspective, what was striking was how the aliens exhibited European models of civility and old eugenicsist presuppositions about intelligence (e.g., they had big crania). This sense of the alien as familiar, which is a contradiction of terms, raises questions of the conditions of appearance. One cannot be seen without appearing, but one cannot appear without standing out, without existing (ex sistat). But there are criteria to be met that enable such emergence. These criteria are an unfolding chain of things that depend on other things. The result is one of being seen-as, to be seen is to be seen as something or another. Serling’s screenplay explored these dynamics through the power of visual media. Because the extraterrestrials could be seen as civilized, in ways that dominate the imagination of civilization, such as being more like very tall and slightly odd Europeans, they were sufficiently familiar to become trusted. The episode revealed the danger of an expanded “we” of consumption versus communication.

The connection between the two episodes, as stories of race, is manifold. From the presumption of white viewers, both brought aliens into their living rooms on the nights they were aired. But the process of bringing the viewer closer to the lives of the characters also part company here, for whereas “The Big Tall Wish” revealed an underlying humanity, and hence affinity, “To Serve Man” reveals the genuinely alien beneath the alien. “The Big Tall Wish” dissolves a false alienness; “To Serve Man” reveals what true alienness might be. Yet there is a link here within the framework of racial grammatology. After all, in the process of making blacks alien, especially in etiological terms of a distorted African past, the popular cultural iconography is the dark cauldron in which simmers white flesh. A continued analysis reveals, however, that company continues to part here as well, for the ascription of “cannibalism” to Africans offers contradictions within a racist schema because in order to be cannibals, Africans must also be human beings. The aliens in “To Serve Man,” the Kanamits were originally called Kanama in the plural and Kanamit in the singular in Knight’s short story. As well, their appearance was pig-like in Knight’s story, whereas Serling’s screenplay made them humanoid in form. The connection between cannibal and Kanama is suggestive, but only such since, in strict terms, an extraterrestrial species could only be cannibals if they ate each other. In this story, they are anthropovores or “man eaters.” It is, however, the presumed shared world by virtue of communication and literacy that promised intersubjective relations that makes the cannibalistic theme return. In meeting such aliens, the understanding of the “we” and the “us” in the universe is supposed to be expanded. In Kantian terms, as co-rational beings, there is an imperative, indeed a categorical one, not to eat each other. The Kanamits, being rational, should understand that argument, which means their failure to be compelled by the categorical imperative raises some important challenges to ethical life on earth. The first is that the scope of ethical life, as human beings understand it, may be relative to human beings or at least the earth, which would mean that Kant’s categorical imperative is in fact, what would be to Kant’s chagrin, a moral anthropology. This would not be so, of course, if the Kanamits actually did understand the categorical imperative but refused to be moved by it; in which case they may just be evil, or at least very bad. There could, however, be an intergalactic version of something like cultural relativism, where the Kanamits fully understand the categorical imperative as an earth value but not part of their rituals and customs in their home planet, or it could be that they fully agree with its logic but add that its domain is relative: universally so for human beings in relation to other human beings; universally so for Kanamits in relation to other Kanamits. Each, in other words, would never eat its own kind, and both could dispute the range of what counts as kind. That ultimately this is a story created by human beings, however, suggests that it is in human terms that it should be understood, and here the consideration of audience returns. Serling, as we saw, was aware of the double world of segregation and racism lived by his audiences. If the earlier consideration of split meaning holds, Serling may have been aware that black audiences would see “To Serve Man” differently than white audiences. Here are some possibilities: Make the human beings black and the Kanamits whites, and the story could also be a retelling of the slave trade. Modern capitalism, with the slave trade and its concomitant racism, did, in a way, eat Africans. Another interpretation is for the black viewer to see the white human characters as now being placed in the situation of blacks in the modern world. It becomes a version of trying to show white viewers what it feels like to be in the place of those who have been crushed or consumed by the hunger of white supremacy and anti-black racism. “The Big Tall Wish” and “To Serve Man” also offer considerations that are not welcomed in a society that seeks “feel good” responses to its racial challenges. In both episodes, the moment of discovery is also a moment of loss. Henry, no longer believing in the power of wishes, takes away his childhood (i.e., ends the child in the boy) and brings both to the world
in which Jackson has lost the fight. Jackson, who did not believe in wishes, simply remains on the floor, defeated; but there is, at least for the viewer, the Jackson of the alternative world, who had encouraged Henry to become a man through giving up his childhood power, but the kind of man Henry appears to be becoming is a profoundly unhappy one. "Defeat" is doubly posed in the plot; one, of wishes in the alternative world; the other, in Jackson lying on the floor, in this one. In "To Serve Man," when the character Pat deciphers the book's true purpose and reveals it to Mr. Chambers while he is boarding the ship, the result is terror. Although the genre is a mixture of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, its allegorical dimensions, as with every Twilight Zone episode, suggest, always, the matter, for the viewer, of what lies beneath. Although tragedy and horror are the intratextual announcement, Serling's doubled understanding of the audience suggests, as well, the resources of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. The former, we should be reminded, argued, in The World as Will and Representation, that reality is blind will covered by illusions of individuation that enable us to take ourselves too seriously. Art manages to achieve a momentary pause in the movement of this blind will by forcing it, for an instant, to see itself through our seeing the futility of our efforts. Beneath all we do and all we wish for, everything ultimately will amount to nothing as blind, uncaring reality moves on in a stream of things that reveal the folly of individual notions of importance. Nietzsche, in The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music, argued from this realization that the genius of ancient Greek drama was its ability to present, in the suffering of innocence before the Greek public, the secret of life, which, apparently, was that life cannot be lived without suffering. The complete avoidance of suffering requires never having been born, which option is not available to someone who is alive. Even suicide is futile, given the precondition of having lived. The task, then, is to affirm life without hiding suffering as one of its dimensions. By these criteria, The Twilight Zone was television's moment of great art.

The Twilight Zone, however, disrupts the ordinary expectations of art. Human beings create art and seek it through our efforts to transform space (including imagined ones) into place and alien surroundings into familiar ones, the most hoped-for of which is home. Every work of art echoes human activity and points, as with Ariadne's thread, to paths that may lead us out of a maze. (It's no accident, for instance, that art galleries and museums resemble labyrinths, and I suspect much fruit can be found in analyses of the role of "exits" in or of such institutions.) It is we who bring art into being through our transformation of signs - objects we "read" in the world - into symbols or meaningful realities. The former are things we understand how to negotiate, but they are not necessarily things available to us in our terms. We share the negotiation of signs, as Ernst Cassirer pointed out in his Essay on Man, with animals. Symbols, however, are meaningful only for us; they are the forms by which we live uniquely human understandings of reality, including our hopes, fears, and anxieties. Art, in this sense, is symbolic. It reverberates human presence and symbolic life, and in so doing, tells us that we (each individual) are not alone. Even the most abstract art, e.g. a dot on a white canvas, echoes a sense of human presence in a vast universe. And more, even misanthropic, art created by human beings to alienate human beings, to be anti-human, to be inhuman, ultimately points to a human origin. It is a performative contradiction. Serling's aims, however, are not misanthropic. The disruptions he offers are more instances of what Jean-Paul Sartre calls, in Being and Nothingness, "metastability," the kinds of displacements that remind us of the incompleteness of existence. This existential dimension, which returns to the question of the "where" of twilight zones, signals a phenomenological consideration as well. Phenomenology offers acts of ontological suspension often referred to as parenthesizing or bracketing the natural attitude. By this is meant the ordinary world of naive experience, where we take for granted the world available to us. When we no longer take that world for granted and begin to question each stage of assumptions or presumptions we may have about it, we move into another realm, the realm of theoretical reflection on a path to thematized, idealized, or (a rather ugly expression) eidetic understanding of the objects of our reflection or phenomena at hand. This "zone," if we will, enables us to explore truth outside of our pragmatic interests at hand. These deeper truths, because no longer in the flux of things and everyday presumptions, are always available to us. They wait, out "there," in the realm of reflective possibility. It is with these extraordinary considerations that the ordinary is revealed as capable of being studied, and the realization of how extraordinary our ordinary, naive assumptions are comes to the fore. Disruptions, displacements, enable us to see what we may not have seen before. The Twilight Zone as art offers itself from the ideas of its writers, but the narrative movement, contextual framing, and content of ideas such as those found in "The Big Tall Wish" and "To Serve Man," phenomenologically understood, stimulate reasoning that disrupts a centered human universe. What is "art," e.g., for the Kanamits? What are the signs and symbols that make them at "home"? In which version of reality does Jackson really belong? And blacks?
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Let us turn here to the work of Frantz Fanon, particularly his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon argued that any serious exploration of race and racism suffers from the problem of its intended audiences' wish to avoid it. Really to discuss race and racism means confronting social situations that are difficult to bear because of not only what they reveal about others but also of the self. Such a claim meant that Fanon had to confront himself through the text, which created a split reflective narrative. Thus, the author of the text found himself not only in conflict with himself in the text but also about the text, that is, at the level of the meta-text. In this struggle, a part of him wins only if another part loses. The internal author, naïve and sincere, attempts to work through the system as a believer in the universal messages of man offered by the modern world. The metatextual author challenges this belief by pointing to the social genesis of symbolically mediated appearance in the face of the demand for human agency, for the transformation of society by those on whom it depends. The realization of the social genesis of the situation of anti-black racism suggests its contingency and changeability. But the absence of necessity is not identical with accident, and so an understanding of the investments in the maintenance of such relationships must be developed. Fanon proceeds in this exploration, much like the protagonist from Dante’s *Inferno*, but with himself also serving as the guide Virgil. He takes the reader through layers of failures—of the limitations of language as a reconfiguration of social roles; of the limitations of a transformed value of the self through the love of another; of the limitations of escape even in the life of dreams; of the limitations of rationality alone on the one hand, humor and affect on the other—to the point of tears by which self-delusion is washed away so that the tragic dimensions of reality can be faced: Modern society has no coherent notion of a normal black person or, more specifically, black adult. To be well adjusted is to be a happy slave, which is abnormal. To be maladjusted as a condition of normality is perverse. To be well aligned with the system is to be white, which makes such a black person an abnormal black person. To be illicit in the system amounts to being an abnormal person. In other words, there is a “Catch 22” circumstance. Fanon calls such a condition “the zone of nonbeing.”

The zone of nonbeing is a form of stillborn status, where one has failed before one has begun. It affects, e.g., dynamics of recognition. One goal of recognition is to be seen as human and valuable. But since the humanity of the seer is presumed, it is his (rarely her) standard of being seen that governs the dialectic. This means that the demand for recognition actually affirms the right of the other to grant it. The project fails from the start. The other movement is at the ethical expectations of recognition or the Self–Other relationship. Fanon argues that the modern world has structured that relationship as properly one between whites and other whites or near-whites or white-like peoples. Blacks are structured as non-Selves and non-Others. It is only in relationship to each other that blacks form a Self–Other dialectic, and from there to whites, asymmetrically, as Others. What this means is that the white world lives without a properly ethical relation to blacks, but blacks always live with a self-recognized ethical obligation to whites. In effect, this means, from the dominant perspective, that blacks cannot “appear” except as illicit. There is always appearance marqué (misapplied or troubled).

Fanon’s response was to reassert an existential thesis to accompany his revolutionary demand for social change. At the beginning of his book, he argued that there are people whose lives are exceptions to his thesis. This is because the subject matter is a human one, and human beings are fundamentally incomplete realities. Fanon, in other words, was not a structuralist. His text demonstrated the claustrophobic impositions of a troubled social world, but much of that depended upon the failure to understand that human reality is not only descriptive but also (among other things) interrogative. The expectation of the white world to be a hyper-rational one is as dehumanizing, in his view, as the demand for the black world to be an overly emotional one. He saw both as an attack on reason. He reflected, for instance, that reason often suffered in interracial settings. It had a habit of walking out the room when he, the black, walked in: As he reached out to reason, his overtures took the form in the eyes of others as cannibalistic and bestial. The cauldron and entertainment in the form of the dancing monkey were his lot. The problem was exacerbated, however, by his having to win reason back reasonably. He needed to show, for example, that hyper-rationality was not identical with reason, or even more: rationality itself, as demanding maximum consistency, could not be identical with reason. This is because reason is a meta-reflective activity. It must be able to evaluate itself and everything else, including rationality. Reason, in other words, lives in a (if not “the”) twilight zone.

Our short detour through the thought of Frantz Fanon should bring to the fore the insights of “The Big Tall Wish” and “To Serve Man.” Those episodes, in stream with many others throughout the series, raised as many questions as they resolved in their cathartic denouement. The boxer Jackson lost much for the sake of ethics. To have won by the wish was to have failed ethically. But the episode did not make the ethical situation that
easy. Something is lost in the transition from wishful child to, in effect, melancholic adulthood. In Black Skin, White Masks an extraordinarily similar situation emerged through Fanon's reflection on Jean-Paul Sartre's identifying Negritude, in his famous foreword "Black Orpheus," as a necessary black anti-racist racism of black superiority over whites for the sake of preparing blacks for more universal revolutionary struggles. Fanon's response? He needed not to know this. Sartre forgot, he lamented, that for the negative moment of the Hegelian dialectic to work, the subject must be lost in the night. In other words, they must believe it. Fanon remained ambivalent to Sartre's deed. It released him from his delusions, but he later reflected, in Year Five of the Algerian Revolution or A Dying Colonialism, that although whites created "the negro" and "the black," it was the latter who created Negritude. He, along with his former lycée teacher Aimé Césaire, took the position that part of the breakdown of delusions required the understanding of white civilization, as well, as barbaric. The atrocities of World War II, for example, were, in their eyes, simply the redirection onto whites brutalities that were considered perfectly ordinary against blacks. There have unfortunately been many instances of undermining the ethical response against those who claim that such instances are proverbial hens coming home to roost. "To Serve Man," in this instance, militates against the comforting denial: "That could never be us." Fanon argued that the building of new concepts and infrastructures that transcended troubled social orders was needed. He, in effect, responded to the collapse of dreams in one generation by demanding imagination and ideals in another. Put differently, Jackson failed to understand that it was necessary for Henry's powers of wishing to last a little longer because Henry, as the next generation, had the future in his hands.

As each episode concludes, these matters continue in the Twilight Zone. We may wish to consider, however, what goes on in that zone that is not appearance and also not absence. The themes considered in The Twilight Zone, including the metaphor of the title, are ultimately penumbral. They are both there and here, but they are also not fully here and there. This is because they are at the edge or liminal points of what we are willing to face. Shadows, after all, can occur where there is also light. Unlike fear, where we face something external and independent of us, the disposition here is anxious. It will be useful in today's continued climate of racial anxiety to revisit and think through the spirit of this unusual exploration of imagination and possibility during the tumultuous '60s. In the present, the symbolic and ethical structure of such issues is being challenged daily as political institutions suffer much erosion as effective forces of social change in favor of mostly symbolic representations of change. Claims of civilizations clashing and the rising xenophobia as nations police their borders while their leaders and intellectuals extol cosmopolitanism no doubt have affinities with fears of hungry extraterrestrials seeking exotic cuisine. Serling's efforts in The Twilight Zone, albeit in the context of entertainment and drama, sought also to bring to that medium a level of reflection that was more than a thematic hook. This is because we face, in the Twilight Zone, ourselves. The edifying message of each episode of Serling's series lingers as the confusing music accompanies the credits with bongos beating to this intense realization.

SOURCES


Serling, Rod (1960) "The Big Tall Wish." *The Twilight Zone*. Season 1, Episode 27.


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**BLENDING FICTION AND REALITY**

"**THE ODYSSEY OF FLIGHT 33**"

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THOMAS E. WARTENBERG

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A Global jet airliner, en route from London to New York on an uneventful afternoon in the year 1961, but now reported overdue and missing, and by now, searched for on land, sea, and air by anguished human beings fearful of what they'll find. But you and I know where she is, you and I know what's happened. So if some moment, any moment, you hear the sound of jet engines flying atop the overcast, engines that sound searching and lost, engines that sound desperate, shoot up a flare or do something. That would be Global 33 trying to get home – from the Twilight Zone.

This speech, made in voiceover by Rod Serling, ends *The Twilight Zone* episode called "The Odyssey of Flight 33" and summarizes the essential elements of its narrative. While en route from London to New York – because the episode takes place in 1961, the airport Flight 33 is heading for is still called "Idlewild" – a jet airliner flying above the clouds gets caught by what appears to be a quite literally "in-credible" tailwind that accelerates the plane to a speed so great that it breaks not the sound barrier but what we might call "the time barrier," for the plane is hurtled back...