

The World of Tomorrow As Seen Yesterday

Or How *Star Trek* and *The Twilight Zone* are still relevant today

Why Would You Do This?

To clarify, I did not spend all my time watching Netflix for this project.

However, we look at past representations of the future in order to study cultural phenomena as well as to look at actual real-world effects.

Both shows provide unique look at the future.

Perhaps if we can understand where we are now based on ideas from then, we can predict where we are going based off of current predictions of the future.

Research Question

If we look at both of these ideas of the future, which one is more “true”?

Meaning, which show is more accurate in their view of the future?

Not just actual impact, but cultural as well.

The Twilight Zone

Written and directed by Rod Serling.

First aired in 1957 and ran for five seasons until 1964 (LaFrance).

Heavily influenced by the Cold War and fear of nuclear war (LaFrance).

Themes of governmental control, the destruction of humanity, anxiety and morality were common (LaFrance).

Made some grim predictions for the future.



Image source: "Rod Serling", Google Images

“The Obsolete Man”

First aired on June 2, 1961.

Follows the story of a librarian who is deemed obsolete by the state and is given a death sentence that will be carried out within 48 hours.

Serling used this episode to discuss the possibility of total, unchecked governmental control and the fear surrounding that.

Serling states that this is not a definite future, but it is a possible one

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/70174067>



Image source: CBS Television, “Photo of Burgess Meredith as Romney Wordsworth from the television program *The Twilight Zone*. The episode is “The Obsolete Man.” 12 May 1961

“Time Enough At Last”

Aired on November 20, 1959

Followed a bank teller who survives a nuclear strike by staying in a vault and finds himself completely alone and with all the free time in the world to read as much as he likes.

Serling used this episode to show the destructive nature of man and the possibility of a nuclear (or other large-scale) strike carried out against the United States and its effects on the individual.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/70110576>

“From Agnes- With Love”

Aired on 14 February 1964

Follows a programmer and a sentient computer who falls in love with the programmer and attempts to sabotage any chance of romantic endeavors that he might pursue.

This episode is an early example of the possibilities of A.I. and its implications for interactions with humans.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/70174120>

“Number 12 Looks Just Like You”

Aired on January 24, 1964

Set in a dystopian world where everyone, regardless of race and gender, are forced to undergo cosmetic surgery to physically alter their bodies into a more attractive model.

This episode looks at the dangers of conformity and the dangers of unrealistic beauty standards.

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/70174116>

A Quick Recap: What *The Twilight Zone* Predicted

Possibilities of A.I., which we're seeing more in today's society as robotics advance

Increasing dangers of beauty standards, as we all move towards possibly looking the same in order to fit in (ironically having to fit in to stand out)

Unchecked governmental control and deeming certain jobs obsolete and treating human life unfairly (not a total correct prediction, but arguable)

Star Trek

Created by Gene Roddenberry and first aired on September 8, 1966.

Roddenberry created a show that took place in the 24th century that “dreamt of a future where there would be no war, no greed, no hate, no hunger. A perfect tomorrow where we would all get along” (Jones, 00:18:10-00:19:11).

Roddenberry used the series to promote a better and more ‘perfect’ tomorrow (Jones, 00:21:49).

Actually has had a profound impact on the world we live in today.



Image Source: CBS Entertainment,
“From Star Trek: The Original
Series”,
[http://www.startrek.com/database_](http://www.startrek.com/database_article/star-trek-the-original-series-synopsis)
[article/star-trek-the-original-series-synopsis.](http://www.startrek.com/database_article/star-trek-the-original-series-synopsis)

Why did this show, of all shows, have such an impact?

Star Trek was really unlike any shows at that time because it featured a woman of color as one of its leading roles (Lieutenant Uhura) , and she had a position of authority to make on top of that. Another leading character (Captain Sulu) was played by a gay asian man, and even another character was supposed to be a Russian, which was shocking given the political climate of the time. The show showed viewers that anyone from any background could be whatever they wanted to be (Jones).

Actual Real-World Impact

Star Trek helped to impact the creation of a couple revolutionary devices that are still heavily in use today:

1. Ion Propulsion engines (Jones, 00:11:16)
2. The modern cell phone (00:14:45)
3. Personal computers (00:32:53)
4. MRI, Ct Scan, and the Cyberknife (00:42:09)

The Themes Compared

The Twilight Zone:

1. Presented a grim and dark outlook on humanity.
2. Humans are, essentially, garbage and will destroy each other.
3. Our own flaws will destroy not only ourselves but our society as well.

Star Trek:

1. Presented humanity as overcoming adversity and inequality.
2. “No greed, no hate, no hunger, and all the children are educated”- Gene Roddenberry (Jones, 00:18:10).
3. *Star Trek* showed “The perfect future” (Jones, 00:03:14).

Some Issues

Arguably, neither show is a perfect representation of the future. Both made predictions about what the future would hold, but neither were really right.

For example, Serling constantly predicted that mankind would devolve into chaos and would give in to our own darker sides and destroy each other then ourselves.

Roddenberry might have created a “perfect future”, but it was still problematic. Women weren’t given quite the same treatment as men, and were objectified and still viewed as objects. Furthermore, the narrative presented in *Star Trek* is a colonialist and hegemonic story in which the white, American male dominates everything he comes across, spreading western idealism across the galaxy (Davidson).

Where Does that Leave Us?

As much as I would like to say it, *Star Trek* is not our current future.

We may have modern technology inspired by that show, but culturally, we're really in the *Twilight Zone*.

We *can* however, come together and work towards an idealistic future where we all get along and there's no war, hate, greed, or hunger; but the likelihood of that happening soon is unlikely. Until then, all we can really do is come together and maybe just listen to each other.

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