Eidos volume 4 no. 4 (2020)

A JOURNAL FOR
PHILOSOPHY
OF CULTURE

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2020.0047

Randall E. Auxier
Department of Communication Studies
Southern Illinois University Carbondale, USA
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1121-1471
personalist61@gmail.com

To Serve Man? Rod Serling and Effective Destining

Abstract:
Popular culture is a vital part of the philosophy of culture. Immersion in the world of popular culture provides an immanent understanding, and after all, some of what is merely popular culture today will be the high culture of tomorrow. The genre of science fiction is one of the more important and durable forms of cultural and social (and even religious) criticism. Science fiction narratives guide our imaginations into the relation between the might-be and the might-have-been. The central idea of this paper is that possibilities have an existence that is intelligible to us, independent of and indifferent to actualities, and involving a distinction between "constellated possibilities" which form a pattern dependent upon one's perspective in some actual standpoint, and "clustered" possibilities, which actually exist entangled and inseparable from one another, as possibilities. Science fiction writers intuitively know that if one introduces a variation into the present in order to trace a plausible alternative storyline from that standpoint, certain other variations will have to accompany the chosen variation in order to maintain the unity of the plot. I use Rod Serling, the creator of the legendary series *The Twilight Zone*, as an example in this paper. Hence, science fiction writers do work with clusters as well as constellations of possibilities (things that merely might happen and things that almost assuredly will eventually happen), and they experience the clusters with a stronger feeling of necessity. I call that feeling *Wirkungsschicksal*, of "effective destining." I will develop this distinction and that stronger feeling of necessity into a method for the philosophy of culture.

Keywords:
popular culture, science fiction, classic television, possibility, future time, effective destining, Rod Serling

The Future and the Past: Constellations and Clusters

Popular culture is a vital part of the philosophy of culture. One might think of philosophers of that culture as those who are committed to keeping philosophy in the closest possible touch with what is happening in the world of the day-to-day, the people going about the business of being human. They create all sorts of things to amuse themselves, to serve their higher and lower desires, to heal as well as to kill each other, and to deal in exchange of all sorts. Philosophers of culture must be both keen observers of what is being made and done, and ought to be participants as well. Immersion in the world of popular culture provides an immanent understanding, and after all, some of what is merely popular culture today will be the high culture of tomorrow.

The genre of science fiction (and here I include the genre called "fantasy") has been widely recognized as being one of the more important and durable forms of cultural and social (and even religious) criticism. Depending upon plausible analogies that depart from a present time we recognize, these narratives guide our imaginations into the relation between the might-be and the might-have-been. Plenty has been written about this, but as far as I know, no one has used its imaginative devices to develop a method for doing the philosophy of culture. Such is my aim here.

The basic structure I will draw on builds upon other work I have done in examining the logic, metaphysics, and modeling of possibility.[1] The central idea is that possibilities have an existence that is intelligible to us, independent of actualities and indifferent to actualities, and that a part of that structure involves a distinction between "constellated possibilities" which form a pattern dependent upon one's perspective in some actual standpoint, and "clustered" possibilities, which actually exist entangled and inseparable from one another. In this second case, one can get predictions of the future by understanding that in seeking and attaining one or a few of the "clustered" possibilities, one will get *all* of them in the bargain. This does not happen in the case of merely constellated possibilities. Obviously I am borrowing the terms from star constellations, which form patterns from one's standpoint on earth (or some other planet), and star clusters, which are stars that actually exist in close proximity and hence are seen together regardless of where one stands. I am suggesting that possibilities have this same structure.

Science fiction writers are not usually explicit about this distinction. But intuitively they all know that if one introduces a variation into the present in order to trace a plausible alternative storyline from that standpoint, certain other variations will have to accompany the chosen variation in order to maintain the unity of the plot. If people have numbers rather than names in one's future, there must be a line from when they had names to the replacement of these with numbers. If they have always only had numbers, it is fantasy rather than science fiction, and the rules are looser, but there are still rules, like the unity of action. Hence, science fiction and even fantasy writers do work with clusters as well as constellations of possibilities, and they experience the clusters with a stronger feeling of necessity. I want to develop this distinction into a method for the philosophy of culture in what follows. One does not have to limit the investigation to science fiction, of course, but the features and implications of this difference between clustered and constellated possibilities appears there in the clearest fashion, so I will stay within that domain for the present.

---

1) I have been working on this topic for over thirty years, and that work is found in many of my articles and books. The most sustained discussion is in my co-authored book, with Gary L. Herstein (himself a gifted writer in the fantasy genre), *The Quantum of Explanation: Whitehead's Radical Empiricism*, chapters 7–9. A closer look at the logic is in my textbook, *Logic: Thinking from Images to Digits*. Specific application to aesthetics is in my "Music, Time, and the Egress of Possibility," and in "From Presentational Symbol to Dynamic Form: Ritual, Dance, and Image."

Plausible Stories

The US television series *The Twilight Zone* is one example of the move from popular to high culture, and obviously spans the genre of science fiction. The series both encapsulated and projected the culture of mid-century America, adding variations (often alien visitation). It is easy to recognize now that these writers and directors and actors were able to get to the beating heart of the Cold War. They showed us the soft, white underbelly of our bellicose dorsal, which was a people afraid of anything and everything. The mind of one master storyteller, Rod Serling, and a team of writers and directors, seized upon this softness and began to poke, prod, and occasionally to stab until the Americans saw themselves in the mirror. But the mirror was usually displaced in time and place in a way that protected the viewers – the increasing millions of them – from having to draw straight lines from the depictions to themselves.

The art of displacement, and, if I may coin a word, "distemporalizing," is central to the philosophy of culture, especially insofar as narration is involved. To tell the story of one group of people, at a place and time, and to see the analogies to one's own place and time is the basic gesture. It is a kind of *Wirkungsgeschiche*, to use Gadamer's term, "effective history," but I would add *Wirkungsschiksal*, if I may be allowed to invent a word in a second language.[2]

The term *Schicksal* is usually translated as "fate" in English, but that is not quite the sense of it. It is a participial expansion of the verb *schicken*, "to send," and so carries the sense of "sending from the future." The word "destiny" is really better. Fate is too deterministic, while destiny is merely a teleological tendency. One could have a narrative that is "real" or "effective destining," *Wirkungsschicksal*: a narrative formed in the present that bears upon our futural protention (individually and collectively) in the way "effective history" bears upon the retention of the past in the present. That is the sort of analogy I have in mind for the narrative that follows. It is also, in my view, what Rod Serling did, over and over, episode by episode. Let us displace, distemporalize, and narrate, with Serling. This is our method: *Wirkungsschiksal*, or, "where you've been is where you're going," (*Herrkunft ist Zukunft*). What does such a method produce? And how? I will explain, by illustration, and then by explanation.[3]

Apéritif

Respectfully submitted for your perusal: The time is late February 1962. Soon, very soon, your Emmy-winning brainchild will come to an end. You are the creator, host, and chief writer for a weekly science-fiction television show, and frankly, you are tapped out. You need a few more story ideas to make it through to the end of your contract and then, you tell yourself, you will take a vacation from writing, maybe teach a few talented college students back home in Ohio. So you ransack the last fifteen years' worth of obscure sci-fi pulp, and there it is. *Galaxy* magazine, November issue, 1950.

---

2) I thank my friend and colleague Godehard Brüntrup for helping me understand what the German language will and will not tolerate in creating such a neologism. He is, of course, not responsible for the things I plan to do with this word.

3) All explanation proceeds from particular to general, I have argued in many places, according to the requirements of radical empiricism. See Auxier and Herstein, *The Quantum of Explanation*, Introduction and ch. 2. I do not claim to be the first to do philosophy of culture in this way. I actually find many others doing something that could be described as *Wirkungsschicksal*. But they do not have the term, or the explicit idea about the structure of possibility. For a really good example of this, see Richard L. Lanigan, "STAR TREK: The Child and the Semiotic Phenomenology of Choosing a Family."

Delectations: Short Stories, etc.

Mr. Poe popularized the short story in the US, but truth be told, it was never that popular. People do not buy collections of short stories (with a few Poe-like exceptions). Magazines publish them for elevated content, in the case of *Playboy*, *The New Yorker*, and so forth, or for filler in lesser magazines, but delightful as the stories are, they do not sell books (or magazines, much). Still, they are excellent exercises in imagination and tremendously demanding to write (well). In prose writing they are a sort of ultimate test, because you only have about three or four words to establish a character. That is a challenge. For example: "They called him Hoss. He sold bait." Perhaps you *see* Hoss in your mind's eye. But now, making him do something that comes to a satisfying conclusion in 300 to 2000 words? That will be a trick. It is an art.

After Poe there were many masters of the short story, Twain, O. Henry, Doyle, Saki, Guy de Maupassant, and Robert Louis Stevenson spring to mind. But for the Cold War era, I think Shirley Jackson (1916–1965) claims the prize for English. Her stories continue to be read and taught, and they stand the test of time. Her influence is very clear in the work of Rod Serling and Charles Beaumont (Serling's main collaborator), as it is in so many others, such as Stephen King, Ursula K. Le Guin, and yes, Damon Knight, who wrote "To Serve Man." She reminds me of a literary version of Rod Serling. I hope it is not indelicate to say that everyone steals food from Shirley's plate.

But Serling is something of a different dish. He was not a writer of short stories, first, and TV scripts later. From the beginning he wrote TV scripts. The opportunity for his generation was extra-ordinary. Plenty of radio script-writers made the transition, but TV was the microwave oven of storytelling, with its own recipes. Serling saw the possibilities right away: TV was the most powerful medium for story-telling ever invented, and it remains so today. For a while it looked like cinema was to take back its supremacy, but then the invention of the "series arc" sets a table for writers, in time and space, that cinema could never match. It is impossible to ignore that the high-end talent has migrated toward television, after it became clear that a seven-season series arc provided a bigger canvas and a bigger audience for one's virtual daubing.

Serling's big idea, after establishing himself as a high-end writer, sort of an Arthur Miller of television, was to bring the standard tropes and forms of the short story into TV, especially as it leaned to science fiction. It was a natural analogy, assuming you could get in and out of a script in about 25 pages. The way Richard Matheson described the formula: "The ideal *Twilight Zone* started with a really smashing idea that hit you in the first few seconds, then you played that out, and you had a little flip at the end."[4] All this changed with the expansion of the series to an hour after 1962. That is a completely different kind of writing. The short story becomes the novella, and the rules are different. That's Flannery O'Connor, not Shirley Jackson.

I realize there is no disputing about taste, but I am a lover of the short story, and of the 24 minute *Twilight Zone*. Serling did, later, publish short stories, but the collection was written into that form by Walter B. Gibson (1963). Although the book went through many printings, Serling's magic does not, in my opinion, survive the transition. If you put him up against the best short story writers of the second half of the 20th century, Serling does not crack the top 100. But as a writer of the 24-minute script, he has no equals. If you want to see the perfect 52-minute script, see Chris Carter, and his crew, Spotnitz, Wong, the Morgans, and especially Vince Gilligan, of *The X-Files* and *Breaking Bad*, and so forth. The latter actually wrote (with his crew) the first episode of the infamous and renowned last season of *Breaking Bad* (in which Walter White puts a huge machine gun in his trunk on his 52nd birthday) without knowing what the climax of the series would be (since it had not been

4) Richard Matheson is quoted in Zicree, *The Twilight Zone Companion*, 296.

written). Interviewed, Gilligan said, basically, "I knew whatever we did, we could work with that." (I am paraphrasing.) Such is the series arc of seven seasons, and such is the 52 minute script.

But Serling's art, nay, his genius, was getting in with a smashing idea and getting out with a twist in 24 minutes. Yet, there is so much more to chew on there, do you not think? I do. I am taken with that first season opening speech about the pit of our fears and the summit of our knowledge.[5] But it never made perfect sense to me. What was Serling saying? I have figured it out now. I will tell you … at the end, with a twist. But I have to put something in *your* oven first, something, ummm, appetizing?[6]

Finger-lickin' Good

The original plot of the short story "To Serve Man," by Damon Knight might cause you to question Rod Serling's judgment.[7] You would be wrong, but you might do it anyway. At this late date, we only know who Damon Knight was *because* Rod *changed* his story and flipped from the magazine frying pan and on to the fiery little screen. The fact that the plot made better sense in Knight's version does not matter. What caught our imaginations – you know, that dimension between the pit of our fears and the summit of our knowledge – then, as now, was the twist on *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (TDtESS).[8] "To Serve Man" fed our growing self-cynicism in just the right way that we felt ourselves fit for some alien's *piece de resistance*.

Too much, too fast? OK, let us back up. "To Serve Man" is one of the more famous episodes of the *Zone*. As with so many of its kin, it irritates some nerve ending leading back to the very brain of our twitchy Cold War nervous systems. At this extremity, the aliens rather than the bombs arrive (it was always pretty much one or the other). As with Klaatu and Gort on the big screen in 1951 in TDtESS, the aliens are here to help us, or so it seems. But this time, we *believe* them, more or less. We let them solve all of our human problems with their superior technology, but *this time* we were wrong. They want to eat us, brazed, broiled, bar-b-cued, baked, and deep-fried. With sauce. Gives "finger-lickin' good" a new meaning.

In terms of *Wirkungsschicksal*, I interpose a question at this point: Why would we believe the aliens this time? It is barely plausible. We never believe the aliens, right? The effective destining of the story is embedded in this question.

The Omnivore's Dilemma

Are these omnivores here to conquer and eat us or help (or both, if you are cynical)? The idea of extraterrestrial life is as old as anything in human culture. True, anciently speaking, these beings were seen (or imagined) as divine – the stars were watchers, the planets were wanderers – but divinity alone does not bestow full godhood; there are many kinds of semi- and demi-divine beings. And beings from beyond may "pay us a visit." Whom do you suppose all those angels and demons are? The idea is primal for humans.

---

5) In case you need to remember it: "It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call *The Twilight Zone*." This was offered at the beginning of 36 episodes in the fall of 1959.

6) The first 5:36 of the show is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOrnVJ23aLQ. The full script is here: http://leethomson.myzen.co.uk/The_Twilight_Zone/The_Twilight_Zone_3x24_-_To_Serve_Man.pdf, accessed August 18, 2020.

7) The short story is available here: http://www.digital-eel.com/blog/library/To_Serve_Man.pdf, accessed August 18, 2020.

8) To see the 1951 movie, one must subscribe or rent, but here us a free radio theater presentation of the script: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9D53xiPF8U0, accessed August 18, 2020.

They may eat us too – the Cyclops eats us, Cronos eats his young, with one important exception; the Giant at the top of Jack's beanstalk eats Englishmen; the Witch eats children like Hansel and Gretel, Grendel's mother wants to eat Beowulf, Satan is chewing on Brutus, Cassius, and Judas at the bottom circle of Dante's hell, the wolf wants to eat Little Red Riding Hood, Zombies eat us, vampires sort of eat us, and it goes on and on. Let us just say we often get eaten. It is surely a deep response to our own eating habits. We cannot help imagining that the table can be turned, so to speak.

The idea that such hungry visitors are "divine" or "giants" is just a way of recognizing the instances when we project superior intelligence and powers that exceed our own. That such visitors may mean us harm as well as good is equally old. See Genesis 6:1 and explain to me what the "sons of God" are *doing* with "the daughters of men," if you are brave enough.[9] Back then, we did not think of these beings as living on other *planets*. That is because we never thought (until a few hundred years ago) that the celestial lights were *places*. We thought they were divine beings, as I said, watchers (stars) and wanderers (planets). We never thought of them as "invading," since it was their prerogative to go wherever they would.

I guess we all trace the alien *invasion* scenario to H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1897). It was among the earliest versions to be written up as an invasion from another place. But back then this novel was really classed with the hundreds of stories about British imperialism that were being published (mainly by anti-imperialists, but not exclusively). Wells, noted political radical that he was, was giving the British a taste of their own stew. Being British himself, he certainly could not imagine a superior race *on earth*, so in order to make the British feel like insects (since that is how *they* treated native populations), Wells invoked the only master race that made sense to a British mind: Martians. Some astronomers had published scientific articles about seeing strange lights on Mars from 1892–1894.[10] Wells had seen the primal meaning of the creepy feeling "they're coming" in those articles.[11] Such possibilities.

Bacon

On the eve of a different kind of British Invasion, one that no one foresaw, although there might have been some detectable noises emanating from Liverpool had anyone possessed the right kind of ear to hear, Rod Serling adapted Damon Knight's idea and put one of those possibilities on our plates: we are not insects, we are simply delicious. If you think it sucks to wake up as Kafka's cockroach one morning, imagine what it is like to be the bacon of the Hyperboreans. But Knight's aliens, the "Kanamits," *were* pig-beings: "short" with "thick bristly brown-gray hair all over their abominably plump bodies" and "their noses were snout-like and their eyes small" with "thick hands of three fingers each."[12]

In Serling's version, however, our galactic gourmands are the giants we always expected, ever since the days of the Titans and their kin from the North Wind. Serling's Kanamit, are "a little over nine feet" and weigh

---

9) The interesting passage reads: (*Genesis* 6) "[1]When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, [2] the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. [3] Then the Lord said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years. [4] The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown." No one seems to know what this was about, although there is much more about it in the Deuterocanon and in such adventurous writers as John Milton and Philip Pullman. Everyone seems to agree it was wicked, however.

10) See Dobbins, Sheehan, "Solving the Martian Flares Mystery."

11) The name of French Astronomer Camille Flammarion is the one to follow in this time and place. Wells was certainly reading him. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camille_Flammarion, accessed August18, 2020.

12) Knight, "To Serve Man," 94–95.

"in the neighborhood of three-hundred fifty pounds." They have no hair (visibly at least), and exaggerated cranial capacity. Instead of Knight's green lederhosen, these Kanamit wear high-collared flowing robes. They do not speak but communicate telepathically with humans.

The way aliens are depicted makes a very great difference as to *which* nerve ending is irritated. In this case, Serling wins the writing contest with Knight. Serling must have seen that if we were going to be lulled into trusting these aliens (and this is the pivot of the problem, as I have suggested), they needed to remind us of our higher selves, not our lower selves. Perhaps the problem Klaatu had with the humans in TDtESS was that he looked *just like us*, and we do not trust *us*. Even less will we trust our uninvited porcine guests. This is basic. The principle of trust, however grudging, is necessary to the story, and depends on an imaginative projection of the higher *human* capacities. Where you have been is where you are going. We need giants, not swine.

From Wellsian insects through Heinlein's "bugs" *in Starship Troopers*, and any number of other insect-based alien images, we move up the spectrum of "life-forms," imagining each form to be hyper-intelligent in turn. Note your own psychological response. We even have the occasional plant-alien, as in Audrey Jr. (*The Little Shop of Horrors*, 1960) or the pods of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Is it true, as Stephen King says, that the real monster is always the one who looks just like us? Some people will rank King's Pennywise (*It*) as among the most frightening monsters in literary or filmatic history. As we move into the human-like range, we introduce distortions or stylizations of the human form, as the plot and setting require. But if we are to be ambrosia, only a god will whet our imaginative appetitions.

An Overcooked Morsel

Speaking of the food of the gods, Immanuel Kant was quite at home with the talk of aliens and life on other planets. Hardly anyone even thought of it back then. True, he was an astrophysicist back when few people had a mathematical understanding of space and time. Still, Kant's casualness about the subject still surprises us. Even today the subject is exotic, and at worst fodder for the lunatic fringe. Now Kant is pretty tough to chew on, a leathery old coot. But it is nutritious reading. Comparing ourselves to aliens had occurred to Kant by 1755. He says:

> If the idea of the most sublime classes of sensible creatures living on Jupiter or Saturn provokes the jealousy of human beings and discourages them with the knowledge of their own humble position, a glance at the lower stages [on Venus and Mercury, perhaps] brings content and calms them again.[13]

Wunderbar Wirkungssckisal! I would say. Did Kant have a television? Moving beyond the recognizably human poses new and curious questions, too. If the aliens look nothing like us, how will we know whether they are friends or threats (or even whether we look like treats, if they are hungry Kanamit)? Is intelligence the key? What about language? Without communication of some sort, how would we ever learn whether there is intelligence? Without it, how would we know whether they are lying? Kant thought we would have to be able to communicate in order to know, a scenario replayed in ten thousand stories of the nervous twentieth century.

We see the "language" angle working as the key to temporal displacement in the popular film *Arrival* (2016) for example, which takes the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to new extremes. In that movie language forms our consciousness, even down to the experience of time, and not only the experience, but the way time *exists*.

13) Kant, *Theory of the Heavens*, 152.

The octopus-looking aliens teach us their language so that we can help them 3000 years in the future. Consider also the debate on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as to whether the "Crystalline Entity" is or is not intelligent; that being is in and of the borderland, where language cannot reach. We learn too late that the entity *was* intelligent, since it conspired with Lore (Lt. Commander Data's evil twin) to destroy the Enterprise-D.

It is too much to swallow, but here is the doggie bag to take home. The aliens cannot be *wholly* other than we are. Kant says that intelligence ("rationality") is universal (and he means, like, the whole universe). So communication must be possible *in principle*, no matter how different we are, and even if it is failing at any given moment. We may not be very impressive to those Kanamit (that word reminds me of the word "Kant," somehow, with "*ami*" in the middle, "friend of Kant"), but they do not just eat us; they take the trouble to communicate with us. Either these hyper-intelligent beings lack a moral compass altogether (an impossibility for Kant) or they regard our lives as quasi-valuable, even if only to fatten us up. Why do they not just eat us without bothering to communicate? They certainly have the power to do that. Is this similar to the way Native peoples of North America ritually thank the deer they have just hunted for contributing itself willingly to their sustenance?[14]

We treat *our* fellow creatures in like manner, after all, and usually factory-style and without thanks or ritual or any communication at all. Maybe if the hogs sent us an e-mail, we would reconsider. I wonder. Give up bacon? Bar-b-que? The human race? Well, I guess some religions do constrain it, at least. But how do those religions even get converts? Have you tasted Memphis bar-b-que? Before you go blaming the Kanamit for their appetites, you might first want to ask why pigs can be trained to obey voice commands. You have perhaps seen the film *Babe* (1995). Is our willingness to farm them based on anything nobler than poor communication (for which *we* hold them *mortally* responsible)? Do they trust us? If so, why?

What's in the Soup?

Further: Have you ever noticed how much Rod's name sounds like "sirloin"? (Sapir-Whorf is hard at work in my imagination, no?) In a noisy Kanamit restaurant, you might order him up, with some Heinz 57, without even meaning to. "Sirling on a rod, please, medium rare." So, we have traced the problem, between us and our fellow porcine earthlings, as between us and our Kanamit visitors, down to a communication breakdown.[15] That is the bread and butter of both Knight's and Serling's stories. In both versions, the humans must be satisfied that the Kanamit are *telling the truth*, so a polygraph is used in front of the whole United Nations, with translators busy as bees to transform the Kanamit's English telepathy into, one supposes, Spanish, and Swahili, and Polish.

An aside: Why does the Kanamit telepathize in English? One would think he might be able to do the trick in all the languages of earth, as adjusted to the hearers' understanding. But no. Aliens always speak English, the first law of science fiction TV and movies. But communication is still pretty hard. Star Trek at least had a "universal translator," and some of the plots of later versions of the series depended on failures of that device. But still, universal translation always seems to be into English. Unless of course, the movie or TV show is, say,

---

14) Of course thanking the prey is just the beginning of what we might do and have done. Patrick Durkin gathers a number of these in his article "Post-kill Rituals: Matters of the Heart." Of particular interest to us is the quote from an authority (zoology professor) named Valerius Geist: "You also don't sit on the animal's body after you've killed it. That dishonors the creature… you show the utmost respect by concentrating on killing the animal quickly. Hunters' conduct toward wildlife and nature should be consistent with their conduct toward other humans." I never thought of it before, but I suppose if people were hunting me, I would prefer to be killed quickly and not sat upon.

15) The basic gesture of my sketch of communication failure is filled out by John Durham Peters excellent, far-ranging scholarly work, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, especially see the Introduction.

German or Russian, in which case it is only sometimes English, and other times comes complete with English subtitles. After all, we all want to know what the aliens are saying.[16]

When asked about their motives, in Knight's story a (pig-like) "Kanama" (singular for "Kanamit," which is plural) says: "On my planet there is a saying: 'There are more riddles in a stone than in a philosopher's head.' The motives of intelligent beings, though they may at times seem obscure, are simple things compared to the complex workings of the natural universe."[17] That part did not make it into the broadcast show. But this line was *in* Serling's script. I do not know why it was cut, either during the filming or by an editor. But it was not broadcast, which is, I think, a shame. It damages the *Wirkunsschicksal*. Fortunately we can recover it. Let us consider the Kanamit (friend-of-Kant) saying: Is the complexity of matters in our minds, or are our minds radical simplifications of the natural universe? I have defended the latter. Mind is inherently simpler than existence – it is generalized, amalgamated, reduced, refined, and ready for use. We give ourselves too much credit in examining the supposed complexity of our minds.

The difference is important, but check out the next bit. The pig in Knight's story prefaces his promise of peace with: "*Therefore*, I hope that the people of Earth will understand, and believe me when I say… . " and then pledges peace. Now, the pig-being *is* telling the truth. He *does* "hope" we will *understand* that his motives are simple, like the saying on his planet, and he does "hope" we will *believe* him about the peaceful intentions. But the hope we will *understand* the saying and the *simplicity* of his intentions (in other words, to eat us) does *not* extend to the part about believing their intentions are peaceful, which he hopes we *do not* understand. The Kanamit have noticed that we think we are very smart, but even a stone is, in its way, far smarter. It does not deceive itself.

I think Serling missed this little trick of language in Knight's story – the parsing of hope between understanding and believing. Since he left out the part about simple motives in the broadcast version; he also left out "therefore" in the final cut. But, the "therefore" and the word "understand" referred *back* to the "saying" on the Kanamit planet (and its moral) about stones and philosophers' heads (which, by the way, not the tenderest part of the philosopher – it is an acquired taste). As I said, the "hope" for understanding did *not* refer forward to the half-truth about the promise of peace. The hope in that case was only that Mr. Kanama *will be believed*. That is another beast altogether.

Copping an Attitude

Philosophers call this sort of linguistic "condition" (to hope, to believe, to understand, to intend, and so forth), a "propositional attitude." Such language alters the truth status of whatever comes after it. This is a true sentence: "The Kanamit are lying about their peaceful intentions toward humans." But "*The humans believe* the Kanamit are lying" is false (in the opinion of most of the humans, at least – the Russian ambassador to the UN seems not to believe the Kanamit; not a friend of Kant, I suppose), even though *part* of the sentence is true. After all, the Kanamit *are* lying. We have a saying among philosophers on our planet: "propositional attitudes have a scope that ranges over whatever comes afterwards, until another attitude or some punctuation limits it." The period, full stop, is a powerful tool. Always has been, except for the ancient world which did not have it. How did they get along? Did they just believe everything? Hardly.

---

16) Nassim Taleb observes: "I am often amazed to hear people from neighboring countries, say, between a Turk and an Iranian, or a Lebanese and a Cypriot, communicating in bad English, moving their hands for emphasis, searching for these words that come out of their throats at the cost of great physical effort. Even members of the Swiss army use English…" Taleb, *The Black Swan*, 219–220.

17) Knight, "To Serve Man," 94.

No magic or mindpower is required to keep the polygraph needle from moving, although in Serling's final version it probably should have moved. The needle may be smarter than the polygraph operator. There is a good reason you get only "yes" and "no" questions when you take a polygraph test. Simple answers use no propositional attitudes to exert influence on the truth or falsity of what is being said. Next time you are taking a polygraph test, answer the yes/no question with "I believe so" and watch the questioner re-ask the question with an admonishment that you keep it to yes and no.

Knight's Kanama is not lying about what he *hopes*, but if you leave out the backward reference to the Kanamit saying, you imply that the Kanama hopes we *understand* that he is lying. That is not what he hopes. Rod Serloin should have removed the word "understand" from the final cut (or cutlet?), since he was removing the Kanamit saying and the "therefore." But he left in "understand," which indicates to me that he had not quite seen what Knight was doing. A communication failure between sci-fi writers. So Serling's Kanama *was* lying. The polygraph, and maybe the audience, should have caught it. Serling did not.

A Riddle, Wrapped in a Mystery, Inside an Enigma

There is yet another big difference between Knight and Serling. In Serling's script, the Kanamit leave their "cookbook" on a table at the UN, evidently so confident it cannot be decoded that they do not care whether the humans try (although they do say we will understand their intentions eventually). Knight's story is different. In addition to our narrator, Chambers, there is a second translator named Gregori, who is Polish – the Poles being renown mathematicians, linguists, and logicians. Gregori gets a job at the Kanamit Embassy and has this Kanamit book by means undisclosed – later we find out he stole it. Gregori says: "You know language reflects the basic assumptions of those who use it. I've got a fair command of the spoken lingo already. It's not hard really, and there are hints in it."[18] A month later our narrator meets Gregori again, who has now translated the first paragraph and knows it is a cookbook.

Serling's script, as published, does not contain the instruction that the episode is to be done in flashback, with Chambers speaking from aboard the Kanamit ship, remembering the Year of the Kanamit. That sequence must have been added later. It was added at the expense of some very interesting and needful material. This temporal shift in the story moved it from *Wirkungsschicksal* to *Wirkunsgeschichte*. We are being warned by Chambers not to believe the Kanamit. But without the flashback, it is about rectifying our way of thinking about our food, by imaginatively including ourselves of the menu. *That* is effective destining. It is not about whom to believe.

In particular, look at this exchange between Chambers and his Secretary Pat, who is the surrogate for Knight's character Gregori. (The name "Gregori" becomes Serling's Russian ambassador to the UN – who, like Knight's character, does not believe the Kanamit, but later ends up quite eager to be a Kanamit kolbasa.)

> CHAMBERS: I'm on one of the ten-year exchange group waiting lists. What about you, Pattie?
>
> PAT: I'm on the list, too. The trouble is their quota's filled twenty-four hours after they make the announcement of a new trip. But while I'm waiting I think I'll do the next best thing. I'm studying their language. I remember a professor of mine told me that language reflects the basis assumptions of the people who use it. (she lights a cigarette) I've got a fair command of their spoken lingo already. It's not hard, really. And there are hints in it. Some of the idioms are quite similar to English. I think I'll get the answer eventually.

18) Knight, "To Serve Man," 96.

> CHAMBERS: More power! I gave up a month ago. They write in ideographs worse than Chinese, but if I can help you in any way –
>
> Close shot Pat As she moves away, a strange look on her face.
>
> (CHAMBERS CONT'D): Did I say something?
>
> PAT: (shakes her head) If you could help me that was the phrase, wasn't it?
>
> Chambers nods.
>
> PAT (CONT'D): The only thing you can help me with –
>
> She looks off.
>
> CHAMBERS: Is what?
>
> PAT: Help me get rid of this strange little know inside me. This very funny persistent nightmarish feeling.[19]

This dialogue did not make it into the final version of the broadcast. I can imagine a few reasons. Knight said that he was aware the weakness in the story was that the "twist" we generally find in short stories depended on a play on English: that "to serve" has both culinary and altruistic fields of meaning. It is true, as Knight pointed out, that it has the same homonymous meaning French and the connotations and usage are almost the same in German, but why would that association show up in a completely alien language like Kanamit?

Serling, as a writer, clearly worried about this glitch of idiomatic language, but perhaps his editors, director, producers, and the whole Hollywood smorgasbord, were able to convince Rod that, well, Americans are so monolingual that it would not occur to the average Ward and June and Wally and the Beav, out on Maple Street, that languages differ in these matters. They all had a little Latin in middle school and at most a year of French in college and that was it. They are just as unsuspecting … as hogs. They are bacon in the making. Short stories are written for people who read. TV programs in 1962 are for people who do not (then and now). No wonder Serloin never wrote anything but scripts. Who would read them anyway? The *Twilight Zone* crew carved the meat out of this episode because they could, because it was TV in 1962, because it was Americans watching from Maple Street.

The Main Course

This brings us to our own main course. I know that you, like me, have thought about those introductory speeches Rod Serling made, especially the one from the first season. Let us remind ourselves of the text:

> There is fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is vast and timeless. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition and it lies between the pit of Man's fear and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of Imagination. It is an area which we call: The Twilight Zone.[20]

19) Serling, "To Serve Man."

20) Serling, *The Twilight Zone,* introduction.

Note that the twilight zone is beyond what is "known" by us, but it is a *middle ground*, not some transcendent realm. It has between light and shadow – a reference to Plato and his infamous cave, perhaps, but have you ever thought about the strange gray between the *object* that casts a shadow and the place, in space and time, where the shadow *lands*? It is hard not to think of Peter Pan chasing his shadow all over the Darling's nursery, but *that* one has come loose, has it not? Imagination at work again. Most shadows do not behave so – physical necessity, right?

But consider: can you make a shadow darker by putting a *second* object between the one casting the shadow and the shadow it casts? Depends on the density of the first object, right? Assume it is dense. Is there still an effect on the shadow by a second object? How can there *not be*? A real, genuine action with no effect, no equal and opposite reaction? There must *be* an effect, right? Looks like we will have to *imagine* a quality of darkness in which an indiscernible non-difference does make a difference, somehow.

That middle ground is identified as the dimension of *imagination*. We fear it because we cannot quite know it. But knowing it is like knowing ourselves. We now come to a point you may not have considered. But Kant did (perhaps his friends also). He imagined the following:

> It could well be that on some other planet there might be rational beings who could not think in any other way but aloud; that is, they could not have any thoughts that they did not at the same time *utter*, whether awake or dreaming, in the company of others or alone. What kind of behavior toward others would this produce, and how would it differ from that of our human species?[21]

As you might expect, Kant thinks these beings would have certain moral advantages over us, since they could not conceal their thoughts *about* one another *from* one another. The scene would look a good bit like the Ricky Gervais movie *The Invention of Lying* (2009), I suppose.[22] Kant sure hated lying. But Kant's point is that we might never in fact be able to attain self-knowledge because we do not actually *have* such races of beings for comparison. We only *imagine* them. At bottom, when we seek to understand our *kind* of being:

> We shall not be able to name its character because we have no knowledge of the non-terrestrial beings that would enable us to indicate their characteristic property and so to characterize this terrestrial being [humanity] among rational beings in general. It seems, therefore that the problem of indicating the character of the human species is insoluble.[23]

To make it plain, we imagine all these aliens because we are seeking a billion varieties of tiny contrasts with ourselves, and while each illuminates a corner, it casts a shadow in doing so. That shadow is us. And we do not know how delicious or bland we are. We imagine the beings and they only ask us questions we cannot answer. The more beings we imagine, the more questions. It is not just aliens; it is all the other monsters too. We try to know ourselves and learn nothing about us, except what we put there to warn ourselves about, well, ourselves. We are the Kanamit. Stephen King was right. If that is not the point, there *is not* a point. Which is my point. *Wirkungsschicksal*. We warn ourselves about what we might become.

---

21) Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View,* 237.

22) For a taste of this, if you do not know the picture, see the trailer here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vn71hYvyqCA, accessed August 21, 2020.

23) Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View,* 225.

Yet, some of these imagined beings *register* with us, strike a nerve, as it were, and others do not. What Rod Serling was uncannily good at was seeing which ones would imprint themselves on our memories, which is almost the same thing as scaring us, but better, far better. If I am right, the most effective destining stories are the ones that tap into clustered possibilities, not just constellations. You feel a cluster. I think the getting-eaten group must be a cluster of possibilities, not just a constellation. When a pattern shows up over and over, chances are we are worried about something we definitely *ought to be* worried about. These clusters are normative. We are not eating right. Serling and Knight were ahead. That was their job, right? These *wirkungschicksalhaft* writers. The factory farms were not advanced in 1950 or 1962, but they were being developed, in the shadow of Auschwitz. Same shit, different day; not *your* species or race today, but tomorrow?

For Dessert: Hyper-reality

Umberto Eco (and others) called this same dimension between light and shadow "hyper-reality." He saw it as the entire virtual world of meanings (and their relations) that we have to *pass through* every time we want to *do* something. None of us wants to do anything unless we are fairly sure of how it will be interpreted by others, and that is part of our concern for what each act *means*. This is a tasty idea. But for us, in this day and age, *meaning* is a sea of possible interpretations, with lots of fish in it. Too salty and none to drink, you know? Every act has a multiplicity of meanings and, as Kant-a-mit indicates, no one is really in a position to say with finality what any single piece of the pie means, in relation to the whole or the other slices. You just do not know what you are eating; interpretation is mystery meat. Eco has a lot of fun with this in his novels, especially *Foucault's Pendulum*. The failure of contrast Kant described has become, for us today, a psychosis of the middle ground, of shadows within shadows, of the middle ground between shadows.

Eco says that "semiotics," the science and superstition of hyper-reality, is the study of anything that can be used *to lie*. There is no possibility of telling the truth unless there is the prior possibility of lying, he says.[24] Eco would not be surprised by the Kanamit, and he certainly would have caught that propositional attitude, dividing "hope" between "understand" and "believe." I do not think he would be booking any space on the Kanamit Exchange Express. It was hard to get anything past him.

This semiotic domain, this hyper-reality, is the contrast that *duplicates*, in language and signs of all sorts, our inability to know ourselves. This duplication of lies is the basic motive behind *Wirkungsschicksal*. If we cannot know who we are, how can we evade a future that includes who we are now in what we do not want to become? The key desire of hyper-reality is *reality*. One thinks of every story from Pinocchio to the Velveteen Rabbit, to the Mannequins in "The After Hours" episode of *Twilight Zone*.[25] All our imagined objects want to be real or die in the attempt. We compare and contrast ourselves with pigs and giants, but they are really just us, exaggerated, distorted, turned, twisted, and they become not part of reality, but more vestiges of hyper-reality. The more of these creations we foist into the middle ground, the less we know about ourselves, and the more ardently we desire it.

What to do in the welter? Binge-watch our *Twilight Zone* and our more recent *Wirkungsschicsalkunst* called *Black Mirror*? The shadows dancing on the walls of the cave have never been better, never more "realistic." Yet, it seems to me that the **Kan**amit (Kan't-name-it) really have a point. We await rational beings for contrast, so that we can know ourselves. Yet, I would add, we *dismiss* every candidate right here, in experience, that presents itself for real comparison and contrast. Are there not other such beings on Earth itself? When was the last time you communicated with your dog or cat? Why will you not eat them? What stops you?

---

24) Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*.

25) The essence of the episode is here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ccbm-v5K20, accessed August 23, 2020.

Given the clear choice of whether to think of other (early) hominid species as being our equals, or brothers, we narcissistically treated them as stages on the way to ourselves. Some people continue to do so even against the clear evidence that beings like us co-existed with both Neanderthals and Homo erectus. In all likelihood, we killed them all, just as we are now wiping out the other Great Apes, and anything else that reminds us too much of ourselves (including members of other nations, religions, races, gender-variations, and neighborhoods). We do not like company, especially our own. Kant called us "sociably unsociable."

Digestif

Respectfully submitted for your perusal: a being who does not *want* self-knowledge … except through the filter of hyper-reality, that is, the products of his own imagination. This beast thrusts his own apish figure into his fifth-dimensional mirror, that growing realm of ever-not-quite, and then finds *no* angels looking back at him. That was Rod's true gift: toss *that* beast into *that* shadow and see what looks back. Or do not. After all, we have warned us.

Bibliography:

Auxier, Randall E. "From Presentational Symbol to Dynamic Form: Ritual, Dance, and Image." In *Dance and Philosophy*, eds. Rebecca Farinas, et al. London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming.

—. *Logic: Thinking from Images to Digits*. Ronkonkoma, NY: Rylan, 2020.

—. "Music, Time, and the Egress of Possibility," in *American Aesthetics: Theory and Practice*, eds. W. B. Gulick and G. Slater, 177–210. Albany: SUNY Press, 2020.

—, and Gary L. Herstein. *The Quantum of Explanation: Whitehead's Radical Empiricism*. London: Routledge, 2017. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315204925.

Dobbins, Thomas, and William Sheehan. "Solving the Martian Flares Mystery." Published by astronomy.org. Accessed August 18, 2020. http://www.alpo-astronomy.org/mars/articles/MartianFlaresALPO.pdf.

Durkin, Patrick. "Post-kill Rituals: Matters of the Heart." *NRA: American Hunter*, Sunday, August 14, 2016. Accessed August 20, 2020. https://www.americanhunter.org/articles/2016/8/14/post-kill-rituals-matters-of-the-heart/

Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.

Kant, Immanuel. *Theory of the Heavens*. In Shendy, Peter. *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosofictions*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

—. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In Shendy, Peter. *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosofictions*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

Knight, Damon. "To Serve Man." *Galaxy Science Fiction* (November 1950): 91–97.

Lanigan, Richard L. "STAR TREK: The Child and the Semiotic Phenomenology of Choosing a Family." In *Semiotics 1993*, edited by John Deely and Robert Corrington, 223–30. Lanham, MD: Semiotic Society of America; University Press of America, 1995. https://doi.org/10.5840/cpsem199314.

Noonan, Chris, dir. *Babe.* Universal Pictures, 1995.

Peters, John Durham. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226922638.001.0001.

Serling, Rod. "To Serve Man," teleplay (March 1962). Accessed March 17, 2018. http://leethomson.myzen.co.uk/The_Twilight_Zone/The_Twilight_Zone_3x24_-_To_Serve_Man.pdf.

—. *Chilling Stories from Rod Serling's The Twilight Zone*, adapted by Walter B. Gibson. New York: Grossett and Dunlap, 1963.

Star Trek: The Next Generation. Episode 1x13. "Datalore." Teleplay by Robert Lewin and Gene Roddenberry.

Star Trek: The Next Generation. Episode 5x04. "Silicon Avatar." Teleplay by Jeri Taylor.

Szendy, Peter. *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosofictions*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt13x01d8.

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, 2nd edition. New York: Random House, 2010.

Villeneuve, Denis, dir. *Arrival.* 2016: Paramount Pictures (North America), 2016.

Wise, Robert. *The Day the Earth Stood Still.* 20th Century Fox, 1951.

Zicree, Marc Scott. *The Twilight Zone Companion.* Second Edition. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.