

# I

## “AND NOW, ROD SERLING, CREATOR OF *THE TWILIGHT ZONE*”

### THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

---

LESTER H. HUNT

It has been said that the so-called “*auteur* theory,” the idea that the director is the true “author” of a film is “probably the most widely shared assumption in film studies today.”<sup>1</sup> Those who are tempted to find in this idea an immutable truth might do well to remember that, for a while during the sixties, there were several American television series in which the “author” in this sense, that is, the artistic personality who dominated the show and gave it its peculiar aesthetic, was a *literal* author: that is, a person who writes.<sup>2</sup> Examples included Stirling Silliphant’s *Route 66* (1960–4) and Reginald Rose’s *The Defenders* (1961–5). The last of them was *The Waltons* (1972–81), by *Twilight Zone* alumnus Earl Hamner, Jr. Probably the finest and surely the best-remembered of this distinguished company was Rod Serling’s *The Twilight Zone*. It was very much a writer’s show. In his on-screen introduction to each episode, Serling always named the author of the episode, if it was someone other than himself, and always named the author of the original story if it was an adaptation. This must have represented an all-time high in respect shown for writers on primetime, network television. Indeed, Serling’s on-screen appearances soon made him the best known, most widely

recognized living writer in the world. Being a writer has never seemed so . . . well, so *cool*. In this chapter I would like to say a few words about how he came to be the writer we know, and how he came to create *The Twilight Zone*.<sup>3</sup>

Rodman Edward Serling was born on Christmas day in 1924 in Syracuse, New York, and grew up in the small southern tier town of Binghamton, where his father was the town butcher. There is a certain irony in this birth date, for Serling was Jewish, but his parents were assimilated Jews and the family always celebrated Christmas, as indeed Serling – who eventually converted to Unitarianism – did all his life. He graduated from Antioch College in Ohio, where he majored in creative writing. Antioch, one of the centers of “progressive education” earlier in the twentieth century, was a hotbed of liberal social idealism, a point of view that Serling absorbed and held as long as he lived. He also had a lifelong affinity for the academic ethos, and more than once he took a very large cut in pay in order to teach creative writing at his alma mater.

He wrote for radio stations in Ohio during the twilight years of that medium and, seeing the words of doom on the wall, began to write for the new medium of television. He sold his first script to network TV in 1950 for \$100.<sup>4</sup> There could not have been a better time for a writer to enter any medium. It was the beginning of the age of live television drama, and the industry, then based in New York, was quickly developing a ravenous appetite for scripts. It also had an aching need for script writers who had two skills that Serling had developed in radio: the ability to write rapidly and copiously, and a knack for writing words that would take a specific number of minutes to say. Television, like radio and unlike movies and staged drama, was despotically ruled by the clock.

Serling thrived in this environment. Indeed several writers did. The writers who got their start writing for live TV included Paddy Chayefsky, Horton Foote, Reginald Rose, and Gore Vidal. For some reason that no one has explained, several of these people almost immediately became famous. Viewers recognized their names and the distinctive qualities of their work. Reviews of a show would to a considerable extent be reviews of the contribution of the writer, who would be mentioned by name. During these years, Serling won an Emmy for his teleplay “Patterns” (aired in 1955), and another for “Requiem for a Heavyweight” (1956). In 1956, Simon and Schuster published a book, titled *Patterns*, containing four of his teleplays and his “commentaries” on each one.<sup>5</sup> All this had happened by the time he was barely more than 30 years old.

## THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

I have suggested that early live TV was more like radio than film with respect to its being ruled by the clock. It had two other characteristics that are worth pausing to notice, because both carried over into the *Twilight Zone* aesthetic. First, they tended to convey narrative, as radio drama did, more by means of dialogue rather than depicted action. Second, they generally used few, often rather cramped, sets. Given that the genre category of *The Twilight Zone* – fantasy and science fiction – is one that we naturally associate with action and visual effects, it is really remarkable how many of the episodes consist mainly of two or three characters talking to each other. In addition, the shows typically use very few sets, sometimes one or two, very often no more than three. Some of the most memorable episodes take place virtually entirely within a single room (for instance, “A Game of Pool”). In several, the claustrophobia-inducing qualities of a single cramped set are actually part of the thematic content of the episode (“Six Characters in Search of an Exit,” “Nervous Man in a Four Dollar Room,” “The Last Night of a Jockey”). These characteristics of the series give it a certain quality, both cerebral and stylized, that seem to enhance its effectiveness as a means of communicating ideas.<sup>6</sup>

In several respects, though, the Rod Serling, who first achieved fame in the fifties, was a different sort of writer from the one that fans of *The Twilight Zone* know. In an article written while Serling’s career was still soaring, Ayn Rand described the difference like this:

Rod Serling, one of the most talented writers of television, started as a Naturalist, dramatizing controversial journalistic issues of the moment, never taking sides, conspicuously avoiding value-judgements, writing about ordinary people – except that these people spoke the most beautifully, eloquently romanticized dialogue, a purposeful, intellectual, sharply focused dialogue-by-essentials, of a kind that people do not speak in “real life,” but should. Prompted, apparently, by the need to give full scope to his colorful imagination and brilliant sense of drama, Rod Serling turned to Romanticism – but placed his stories in another dimension, in *The Twilight Zone*.<sup>7</sup>

On at least one point, this is a penetrating description of the transformation that Serling underwent. Though I would rather say that the early Serling tended to conspicuously *appear* to avoid value-judgments, and prefer to call Serling’s early style Realist rather than Naturalist, it is true that his work before *The Twilight Zone* was mainly in the aesthetic camp of Realists and Naturalists.<sup>8</sup> In 1949, Serling attended the first New York run of *Death of a Salesman*, with Lee J. Cobb as Willie Loman, and it seems to have made a powerful impression on him.<sup>9</sup> “Patterns” can be read as

a sort of corporate *Death of a Salesman*, told from the point of view of one of the newcomers who are edging the Willie Loman character out. More generally, all of Serling's more ambitious early teleplays bear the most salient features of *Salesman*: they depict ordinary people dealing with today's problems and speaking today's language (or, more exactly, an idealized version of it). Their strongest emotional effects were achieved by setting these ordinary people on a collision-course with some sort of climactic result. It was the sort of thing that reviewers liked to describe as "gritty," "unsparing," and "hard-hitting."

His work in *The Twilight Zone* is not merely different from this; it is, as Rand suggests, in an altogether different aesthetic tradition. In *The Twilight Zone*, he is no longer in the Realist or Naturalist camp of writers like Arthur Miller and Frank Norris; he is in the Romantic, allegorical, or fantastical school of Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. In Serling's life, the advent of *The Twilight Zone* was almost like one of the surprise endings that seemed typical of a *Twilight Zone* episode, those ironic twists that Serling sometimes called "the snappers." It was unpredictable and yet somehow logical after the fact. What was the nature of the logic that brought this transformation about? Rand speculates that he was driven in that direction by his own inner necessity. There I think she is simply wrong. Curiously enough, *The Twilight Zone*, probably Serling's most lasting achievement, was dragged out of him by circumstances beyond his control, almost against (as he saw it) his better judgment.

The origin of the transformation lay in a feature of early live television drama that I have not touched on yet, one that was not at all to Serling's liking. It is somewhat difficult for us to fully appreciate today, because it is somewhat alien to the nature of the mass media as they exist in our time. However, it is important for understanding the way Serling's career eventually developed. Everyone knows that network television gets its money from paid commercial announcements. In those days, this gave the sponsor a remarkable amount of control over program content. Sponsors often seemed to think of the shows as long, lavish, expensive ads for their products. Indeed, as in the days of radio, the name of the sponsor was often part of the title of the show. This was true, for instance, of the first of the hour-long live dramatic shows, *Kraft Television Theater* (premiered in 1947), and it was also true of the very last of them, *Bob Hope Presents the Chrysler Theater* (cancelled in 1965). Representatives of sponsoring companies, usually employees of their advertising agencies, actually read scripts before they were produced, and they often demanded changes. They nearly always got what they demanded. This

## THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

influence took two forms, one of which was petty and the other potentially devastating.

In those days, the advertising industry was in the grip of a theory that held that consumer purchases are conditioned by factors that are a) extremely subtle, but b) identifiable by the clever people who work in the advertising industry. One practice that resulted from this curious theory was that of avoiding all mention of the competitor's product. In an early script for *The Twilight Zone*, a British navy officer orders a tray of tea to be brought up to the bridge. The sponsor, manufacturer of Sanka instant coffee, objected to the word "tea." The offending phrase, Serling tells us, was changed to "a tray."<sup>10</sup> Another practice, often just as silly as this one, was to avoid anything that would associate one's own product with something unpleasant. To give another of Serling's examples, in the original, *Playhouse 90* version of "Judgment at Nuremberg," one of the sponsors, a consortium of gas companies, had every mention of "gassing" and "gas ovens" expunged, evidently for fear that the viewers would unconsciously associate their product with Nazi genocide.

This sort of interference was annoying at best, degrading at worst, but Serling could put up with it when he had to. There was another sort of interference that was much deadlier, though evidently based on the same sort of thinking. The same instincts and assumptions that prompted advertisers to avoid associating their product with anything unpleasant also led them to avoid anything that might make anyone angry. The word that inevitably sprang up in these situations was "controversy." "Controversial" subjects tend to cause people to write angry letters to the network and threaten to do things like not buy the sponsor's product. Such subjects are therefore to be avoided altogether. Serling's early career, from its beginning up to the end of *The Twilight Zone's* five-season run, can be seen as a series of responses to this practice.

One response was, quite simply, to argue against it. He was good at this and often did it in public. In the long introductory essay in the *Patterns* book, titled "About Writing for Television," Serling mounts his most sustained argument against television censorship on the part of sponsors. The core of his case consists of two narratives. These are the sad stories (sad as he tells them, at any rate) of two scripts of his that were produced in 1956. Both stories recounted events that were disappointing to him, one of them much more bitterly so than the other.

The first of these scripts was "The Arena" (directed by Franklin Schaffner), which aired on *Studio One* on Monday April 9 of that year. The title refers to the United States Senate, indicating that it will be treated

as a place in which men meet to fight. Its central character is Jim Norton, an inexperienced young Senator, appointed by the governor when his predecessor died in office. Jim idolizes his father, Frank Norton, who was also a Senator. As a result of this, he harbors a bitter grudge against Rogers (the character is apparently never given a first name), the senior Senator from his state. Rogers had brought the elder Norton's political career to an ignominious end by leading a successful campaign to block his re-nomination some years earlier. He did so in spite of the fact that he is a member of the same party. It is clear that he thought him a bad Senator, mainly because of his over-indulgence in pork-barrel legislation. The younger Norton seems unable to control his temper and soon, first at a press conference and then on the floor of the Senate, launches intemperate verbal attacks on Rogers, who has no trouble provoking him to act like a hot-headed fool. Before long, Jim's reputation is in tatters, and it seems doubtful he will be able to accomplish anything of value in Washington. The real dramatic conflict in the story, one that occurs not between Rogers and Norton, but inside Norton's head, comes when his political advisor blurts out, while drunk and discouraged, something that very, very few people know: many years ago, Rogers was a member of a vicious group called "The Defenders," a thinly disguised version of the Ku Klux Klan. If Norton releases this information, Rogers will be ruined and his father avenged. In a climactic scene on the floor of the Senate, Rogers, who had figured out what Norton is planning to do, lets it be known that he will announce his resignation, but Norton heads him off, at the last possible minute, by indicating that he will not use his information.

Serling had high hopes for "The Arena," high enough to submit it to a major studio for consideration as a possible feature film. But its reception was disappointing. Serling clearly thought part of the blame belonged to the artificial restrictions built into the television medium by the producers and sponsors. In particular: "One of the edicts that comes down from the Mount Sinai of Advertisers Row is that at no time in a political drama must a speech or character be equated with an existing political party or current political problems." The object of this stricture was to avoid, at all costs, appearing to take sides on any current controversies, because that would have meant offending someone. This is workable enough in political dramas set in the distant past: he would have been permitted to depict, say, Lincoln and Douglas debating abolitionism because slavery is no longer controversial. There will not be any angry letters if *Studio One* comes out against slavery. But in a political drama

## THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

set in the present, the characters would have to either avoid ever talking about politics, or talk about it in such a way that viewers could not tell what they were saying.

In "The Arena," according to Serling's account of it, he in effect took the latter course, with ridiculous results. Viewers who tuned in that April evening, he says,

were treated to an incredible display on the floor of the United States Senate of groups of Senators shouting, gesticulating and talking in hieroglyphics about make-believe issues, using invented terminology, in a kind of prolonged, unbelievable double-talk. There were long and impassioned defenses of the principles involved in Bill H. R. 107803906 [actually, it was HR 1932: a little comic hyperbole here?] but the salient features of the bill were conveniently shoved off into a corner. . . . ]

As a matter of fact, the existing script of "The Arena" is not nearly as bad, on these particular points, as Serling makes it sound.<sup>11</sup> In the scene in question, young Norton is claiming that his father deserves some of the credit for the passage of HR 1932, as it embodied principles for which he had long been fighting. Rogers replies that Norton had earlier inadvertently killed two very similar bills by attaching to them amendments "granting special privileges to interests in his home state" – measures, in other words, that constituted pure pork.<sup>12</sup> The charge is of course that his commitment to currying favor with his constituents at others' expense was stronger than the alleged political principle involved. The audience is never told what HR 1932 contained and is therefore in the dark about what the principle involved was. However, I would think that, for purposes of plot, characterization, and theme, it does not really matter very much what the principle is, and I don't think that the audience feels very confused about it.

Still, a case might well be made that the advertisers' ban on discussions of controversial issues did damage the script of "The Arena," and in a way that is actually more serious than the one Serling has alleged. After all, the ban means that, if Serling writes a script about contemporary politicians, he cannot clearly depict them *discussing politics*. Because of this stricture, he can only depict his principal character engaged in discussions on the Senate floor by depicting him as obsessed with the *purely personal* issue of Rogers' treatment of the character's father. But this motivation is really too petty and irrational for the viewer to feel a great deal of sympathy for his plight, or interest in how he resolves it. The

fundamental point that Serling makes about the script of "The Arena" is I think correct: it is indeed a flawed script, and censorship on the part of advertisers is indeed part of the reason it is flawed.

The other script that Serling singled out as a case study for his indictment of television was "Noon on Doomsday," which aired on April 25, 1956 on the *United States Steel Hour* (produced by the Theater Guild and directed by Daniel Petrie). Here the story is a good deal more complicated than the story behind "The Arena," and it is also more interesting. The "Noon" script was inspired by Serling's anger over the notorious Emmett Till case, which had occurred the year before. Till, a young African-American from Chicago, was traveling in Mississippi, when he whistled at a white woman on the street. For this he was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by white supremacists. The two men charged with the crime were tried in an atmosphere of intense media scrutiny, especially from the North. They were found not guilty on all counts. Serling believed that the disapproving attention they got from the North "was like a cold wind" that made the people in the Mississippi town "huddle together for protection against an outside force which they could equate with an adversary."<sup>13</sup> Thus, in his view, the whole town became complicit in the crime of the murderers.

The original version of his script for "Noon," Serling later said, followed the facts of the Till case "very closely."<sup>14</sup> However, Lawrence Langner, President of the Theater Guild, told Serling: "The only problem is that you can't make it [i.e., the conflict in the story] black and white."<sup>15</sup> Serling made the victim of the murder an elderly Jewish merchant. The killer was, as Serling later put it, a "neurotic malcontent" seeking a scapegoat for his own problems.

Somewhere during this course of events Serling mentioned to Dave Kaufman, a friend of his who wrote for *Variety*, that he was writing a show based on the Till case. Later (in a letter dated March 4) he asked Kaufman to mention the show in an article, but to report it as a rumor (i.e., not attributing it to him), as the network was not ready with an official press release. Kaufman did plug the show, but innocently added the earlier factoid, which was gradually becoming out of date, that the show was to be based on the Till case. What followed was an advertiser's worst nightmare. Across the South, White Citizen's Councils launched letter-writing campaigns. Southern branches of U.S. Steel, as Serling later told Kaufman, "bombarded" the network with telegrams demanding that "this here Till story" not be shown in the South.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, everything that could possibly suggest the South was removed from the "Noon" script.



## THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

The setting was moved to New England. Every word in the dialogue that could possibly have suggested a Southern accent or dialect was altered. Under no circumstances was the word *lynch* to be used. Bottles of Coca Cola were removed from the set (probably because Coke was originally a product of the state of Georgia). The murder victim was changed from a Jew to a non-specific “foreigner” (the victim’s name eventually became Chinik). For some reason, Serling was also pressured to change the murderer from a neurotic malcontent to a decent kid who had momentarily gone wrong, a change that would probably have made the character unintelligible, but he put up what he called “a Pier 6 brawl” and blocked that particular revision.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the agony of creating it, Serling had high hopes for the “Noon” script, just as he had earlier had for “The Arena.” During the month or so before airing, he repeatedly wrote to friends and acquaintances urging them to tune in when it aired, and he sent a copy of a draft of the script to United Artists, as a possible basis for a feature film.<sup>18</sup> After it was aired, however, he was rather taken aback by the mixed reaction to the show. Though it was praised elsewhere, it was panned in a brief review in the *New York Times*.<sup>19</sup>

He received a number of pieces of mail criticizing the show. One particularly acid-penned missive was a postcard from a stranger in the Bronx. Signed simply “A crank named M. Kroll,” it said:

May I congratulate you on your effort not to offend your sponsor, U.S. Steel.

I am sure if Emmett Till could, he would thank you for at least basing your drama on his murder.

Finally, may I congratulate you on your unimpeachable writer’s integrity. I’m sure your script fee will be a soothing balm for your conscience.<sup>20</sup>

Remarkably, Serling wrote a reply that was well over a page long (single-spaced), and was, considering the provocative nature of Mr. Kroll’s postcard, very well-reasoned. One reason for this, I think, was the fact that Kroll gave his name and address. Serling was by now well enough known to have received many letters from cranks, and the ones he really detested were those that were anonymously written. He thought of anonymous letters as attempts to intimidate and silence him, rather than efforts to open a dialogue. In addition, it is clear that Kroll’s malicious little note had hit a tender spot. Serling replied: “Were I not to perform certain of the dilutions to my script, it would never have gone on [the air].” He continued:

LESTER H. HUNT

I may be wrong, but I felt that NOON ON DOOMSDAY made itself heard. It did it obliquely and sometimes badly. But the words were there. And they stated quite clearly the extension of prejudice is violence; that prejudice is ugly, dirty and dangerous – no matter what level it exists on, or what group it aims at.

No, Mr. Kroll, probably the tragic figure of Emmett Till would hardly thank me for my efforts. But I wonder if, knowing the circumstances, he would accuse me of jobbing off an ideal for a script fee.

I worked almost a year on NOON. The last month before its production was a night and day job of trying to protect its basic premise, of trying to fight and scratch to just get it on. I can assure you that this wasn't done for a fee. I make a hundred grand a year and most of it comes without any altercations. For NOON ON DOOMSDAY I beat my brains in – and I do it knowing that whatever the end result, I'm going to get needled to death for my cowardice and my compromises.<sup>21</sup>

Some months later, when he was writing the introductory essay for the *Patterns* book, he had come to regard “Noon” as a failure. The main reason for this failure, as he saw it, was the restrictions that were part of the medium of television at the time:

What destroyed it as a piece of writing was the fact that when it was ultimately produced, its thesis had been diluted, and my characters had mounted a soap box to shout about something that had become too vague to warrant any shouting. The incident of violence that the play talked about should . . . have been treated as if a specific incident was symptomatic of a more general problem. But by the time “Noon on Doomsday” went in front of a camera, the only problem recognizable was that of a TV writer having to succumb to the ritual of track covering so characteristic of the medium he wrote for.<sup>22</sup>

This I think is an astute assessment of what went wrong with this script. Serling's strategy in “Noon” was to attack a general issue by narrating a single, concrete example of it. In order to work, a narrative of this sort must possess the virtue of *clarity*: the example, and the generalities in the speeches of the characters, should be handled in such a way that they shed light on each other. The concrete events put a human face on the generalities, while the generalities give the concretes universal relevance. In the “Noon” script, this fails to happen.

The events in the final script's narrative concern the aftermath of the trial of a character named Kattell, the nasty young malcontent I mentioned earlier. He has killed the “foreign” shopkeeper in a quarrel about whether

## THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

he can have a bottle of wine on credit, but the jury finds him not guilty. The main action involves two characters who are appalled by the trial and its outcome: Frank, the father of the lawyer who successfully defended Kattell, and Lanier, the journalist who has been reporting the trial to a disapproving outside world. In the climactic scene, they confront Kattell in front of all the townspeople, who have gathered for a Founder's Day celebration. They provoke him into physically attacking both of them and to declaring that he did kill the old man, and that anyone would have done the same. At last, the people of the village are as appalled as Frank and Lanier are. He has lost the moral trial (as one of the characters calls it), despite having won the legal one. Then Frank berates the villagers:

I call this boy [Kattell] a monster – because what he's done is the extension of your prejudice. He's the trigger finger for all your hatreds – for all your narrowness. He belongs to you and his crime belongs to you because you spawned it, and you spawned him.<sup>23</sup>

This of course is the point of view that the author wants to communicate. The trouble is that it does not clearly and convincingly refer to the events in the teleplay. The script is set in contemporary America. The setting licenses the audience to assume that the things that are true of contemporary America (all those things and only those things) are true of the story, except of course for all the details that are actually presented in the performance. And in contemporary America the audience knows of no social problem of hatred of European immigrants who speak English with an accent, on the massive sort of scale that could implicate a whole community in the act of one individual.

This problem is of course a direct result of the network's policy of controversy-avoidance. To effectively make the point he wants to make, in a realistic drama set in contemporary America, Serling would have to depict a minority group against whom many Americans really do have a virulent prejudice. But then the network could expect to get angry letters – from nativists, racists, and xenophobes, and possibly from minority group members as well. What can he do?

At this point in Serling's career, there has arisen a dramatic situation not unlike one that might hold at the outset of one of his early teleplays: there are conflicting forces afoot that combine to bring about an unstable situation. Something has got to give. Serling clearly wants to deal with issues that are important and relevant to the lives we are living today, which

means that we do not agree about them. This would clearly require him to deal with controversial subjects. But on the other hand he is working in a medium that shrinks from controversy of any sort. Whatever happens next, it will have to be something new.

One direction in which events might develop was suggested in a letter Serling wrote soon after the exchange with Mr. Kroll, to Nolan Miller, his mentor and creative writing teacher at Antioch College. Noting that the Steel Hour version of "Noon" was "a greatly diluted and watered down version of the Till case," he says that he was now in the second draft of rewriting it as a stage play. Legitimate theater is far more accepting of controversy than the medium that was his current home:

In its play form ["Noon"] doesn't futz around; it gets to the point in a hurry and it calls a spade a spade. I choose to think that I have sacrificed no drama in making it pretty sociologically telling.<sup>24</sup>

The play version was at the time being considered for summer production at the Playhouse in what was then Serling's home town, Westport, Connecticut.

The play version of "Noon" was indeed direct and blunt in all the ways in which the U.S. Steel Hour script was indirect and evasive. The town is identified as Southern in the very first line of the play. The murder is depicted on stage, and the victim is, like Till, a young black man. His killer is a white racist. The dialogue is peppered with nasty racial epithets. However, the play version was, curiously enough, not really an improvement over the Steel Hour script. It simply has the opposite sorts of flaws and shortcomings. Where the television show suffered from abstract speeches without adequate concrete events to which they can refer, the play presents lurid concretes without any universal point. In it, the fundamental conflict is not between different ideas, nor between rationality and prejudice, but simply between North and South. At one point in Act II of the play, in which a Southern segregationist is arguing with a Northern newspaper reporter, the Southerner throws out the then-familiar argument that, though we in the South are openly racist, you Northerners are covertly so, practicing *de facto*, unofficial segregation while hypocritically giving lip-service to justice and equality. Instead of saying that this is completely irrelevant to the principle involved, the Northerner says:

If you tried to peddle Kattell [the murderer] up North all wrapped up with your little Southern legal refinements – take a cold-blooded killing, dress it

## THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

up with a joke prosecutor, comic witnesses, and a circus trial – you’d get results. You’d get mass vomiting from Los Angeles to Backbay Boston. I’ll grant you something, Mr. Grinstead, sometimes when we point a finger at you, we’re the pot and you’re the kettle. But when you scratch through down to the bare rock and you come up with the one basic thing like human life – this we gotta butt in on.<sup>25</sup>

This, especially for Serling, is bad dialogue, but what I would like to point out is that the story, as reframed and retold in the play version, embodies a flawed rhetorical strategy. Serling is not writing the play merely to entertain, but to enlighten. He wants to convince people that the Southern system, as it existed in 1956, was unjust. But who is the intended audience, the would-be recipient of this enlightenment? The people of Westport, Connecticut are already aware of the simple truth he means to communicate. The racists of Alabama, on the other hand, would also fail to be enlightened by it – though for a different reason. In either case, Serling’s argument will either induce yawns or fall on deaf ears. In the second telling of the “Noon” story, Serling wrote more or less directly about the specific event that inflamed his passionate concern: namely, the Till case. But this particular event, as interpreted by his anger, does not make a very good story. As far as I have been able to determine, the play has never been produced.

The story of the “Noon” script does not end here. Remarkably, Serling told the Till-based story one more time, and the last telling of it indicates the direction his work was soon to take, in *The Twilight Zone*. The third telling was a 90-minute teleplay that aired on *Playhouse 90* on June 19, 1958 (directed by John Frankenheimer), “A Town Has Turned to Dust.” In this version of the story, he salvages the plot and a central character that he developed for the brutal, unpublished, and unperformed stage play version of “Noon.” He also convincingly depicts real prejudice and vicious intergroup anger and hatred. How does he get away with it? By retelling the story *as a western*. In the new version, the story is set in the American Southwest in the nineteenth century. Racial tensions between the Anglo settlers and the indigenous Mexican population are inflamed by a long, cruel drought (hence the literal dust that is one of the title’s meanings). In the jail is Pancho Rivera, a 16-year-old Mexican boy who, we are told, attempted to rob the local store and rape the wife of Jerry Paul, the storekeeper. Paul has been haranguing an angry mob, urging them to storm the jail and lynch the boy. When the mob storms the jail, Sheriff Denton’s deputies all desert him and he eventually caves in and hands

Pancho over to the mob. The crowd lynches him by hanging him, just off screen, from a flagpole. After Pancho is buried, Ramon, his brother, enters the white-only saloon with a friend. Jerry Paul orders them to leave, but Sheriff Denton, who seems to be developing a backbone, declares that they are his guests and can stay. Paul lunges at Ramon, who stabs him in the shoulder with a knife. In the ensuing confusion, Ramon and his friend manage to get across the street and into the jail, bolting the door behind them. Faced with the inevitability of another lynching if he does nothing, the sheriff joins Ramon in the jail and passes out weapons and ammunition. When Ramon asks him if this is just “a grand gesture,” he declares: “This is the one we go the route.”

Once again, there is a vicious, angry mob at the door of the jail. This time, Paul’s wife shows up and addresses the mob. She reveals to them something that the audience has already come to know in an earlier scene between her and her husband. The Mexican boy was actually innocent of the offense for which he was lynched. She had fallen in love with him, a fact that inspired jealousy and racist rage on the part of Paul. Just as Paul turns his gun on his wife to shoot her, Sheriff Denton shoots and kills him. Flagg, the town bartender, is surprised that Denton appears to be guilt-stricken at having to kill Paul: “You didn’t have no choice,” he says. Denton says: “We all had a choice. That was the one treasure we had – the privilege of choice. To live with what we’ve got – or try to blame someone for what we’ve got. That’s why Jerry Paul is dead now.”<sup>26</sup> He tells the village priest that he has a confession to make. He then reveals something crucial to understanding his earlier weakness in his handling of the Rivera lynching. At several points in the narrative, we have heard references to another lynching, a “migrant worker” who was dragged to death behind a wagon during another brutal drought 16 years ago. Denton was a member of the earlier lynch mob, in fact he was the leader. He has been weakened and compromised by guilt ever since. He then goes into the jail and closes the door. A long silence is broken at last by the roar of a gunshot from within the jail. A voice-over narration by Hannify, the reporter who has been telling the outside world of these events, rounds the narrative off with a comment that anticipates Serling’s later Aesopian epilogues in *The Twilight Zone*:

Dempseyville got rain tonight . . . for the first time in four months. But it came too late. The town had already turned to dust. It had taken a look at itself, crumbled and disintegrated. Because what it saw was the ugly picture of pre-judice and violence. Two men died within five minutes and fifty feet of each

## THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

other only because human beings have that perverse and strange way of not knowing how to live side by side. Until they do, this story that I am writing now will have no ending but must go on and on.<sup>27</sup>

The teleplay of “Dust” is as powerful and focused as that of “Noon” is weak and vague. Unlike the earlier script, “Dust” was praised in the *New York Times*, which spoke of its “vivid dialogue and sound situations.”<sup>28</sup>

This, however, was not how Serling saw his performance in the “Dust” script at the time it was produced. In fact, he used “Dust” as an example of the damage done by censorship, as he had earlier used “The Arena” and “Noon.” He made this bitter comment on it in the *Cincinnati Post*:

By the time “A Town Has Turned to Dust” went before the cameras, my script had turned to dust. Emmett Till became a romantic Mexican. The setting was moved to the Southwest of the 1870s. The phrase “twenty men in hoods” became “twenty men in homemade masks.” They chopped it up like a roomful of butchers at work on a steer.<sup>29</sup>

This, I probably should point out, might be another case of Serling exaggerating the damage done in order to make a point. There are two drafts of “Town” that are known to me, and neither contains the phrase “twenty men in homemade masks.” The nearest approximation that I can find is in the later of the two, which is marked “REHEARSAL SCRIPT” on the title page, and there the phrase is “twenty men in sheets.”<sup>30</sup> It replaces a phrase in the earlier draft, “six men in sheets.”<sup>31</sup>

More important, for present purposes, is the fact that in these comments he seems to be expressing the view that a work of art that deals with the issues raised by the lynching of African-Americans is damaged, perhaps ruined, if it depicts some other minority in place of African-Americans. The same view is probably what prompted John Frankenheimer, director of “Dust” for *Playhouse 90*, to say in an interview many years later, that it represented “a terrible compromise, terrible compromise” with the censors.<sup>32</sup>

In an interview with Mike Wallace given just days before the air date (October 2, 1959) of the first episode of *The Twilight Zone*, Serling made some comments about his new series that have been quoted many times over the years. Wallace said to Serling that since he was “going to be obviously working so hard on *The Twilight Zone*” then “in essence, for the time being and for the foreseeable future,” he must have “given up on writing anything important for television, right?” In response to this rather

obnoxious question (it was at around this time that *Mad Magazine* parodied Wallace as “Mike Malice”) the usually unflappable Serling seemed just a little flustered. He said:

Yeah. Well, again, this is a semantic thing – important for television. I don’t know. If by important you mean I’m not going to try to delve into current social problems dramatically, you’re quite right. I’m not.<sup>33</sup>

I am sure many *Twilight Zone* fans have wondered what these two were talking about. *The Twilight Zone* not important? What do they mean by that? Decades later, Wallace explained Serling’s answer like this: “At the time he did the interview, he’d just gotten through battling censorship and gotten through battling the system. So of course he was going to say, ‘I’m not going to do anything controversial’.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, Serling is telling a little white lie to avoid more self-defeating battles with bone-headed advertisers and their groveling network yes-men.

However, there is another way of reading these comments of his. If we look at them in the context of his remarks about the “Dust” teleplay, and more generally in his roots in aesthetic Realism, it is possible to see Serling’s state of mind at the time of the Wallace interview as more complex than it seems at first. A minute or so after the above exchange with Wallace, Serling said:

I stay in television because I think it’s very possible to perform a function of providing adult, meaningful, exciting, challenging drama without dealing in controversy necessarily. This, of course, Mike, is not the best of all possible worlds. I am not suggesting that this is at the absolute millennium. I think it’s criminal that we’re not permitted to make dramatic note of social evils as they exist, of controversial themes as they are inherent in our society. I think it’s ridiculous that drama, which by its very nature should make a comment on those things that affect our daily lives, is in the position, at least in terms of television drama, of not being able to take this stand. But these are the facts of life. This is the way it exists, and they can’t look to me or Chayefsky or Rose or Gore Vidal or J. P. Miller or any of these guys as the precipitators of the big change. It’s not for us to do it.

I hear in these words a sincere ambivalence about the *Twilight Zone* project, and it seems to be rooted in a line of reasoning that would come very naturally to one who is at the time still rooted in the Realist tradition. The underlying assumption behind all these comments – both what he is telling Wallace about *The Twilight Zone* and what he said earlier about



## THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

“Dust” – is the idea that art deals with the problems of the actual world, as it exists today, by depicting the actual world as it exists today. From this point of view, dealing with prejudice and mob violence as it exists in 1959 by depicting Mexicans in the 1870s is nearly as bad as depicting violence against a nondescript “foreigner.” And, surely, dealing with it by depicting aliens or robots is incomparably worse. You either depict the problem in its actual, concrete specificity, or you water it down and compromise, or you do not deal with it at all.

Of course, other views are possible. An alternative view was suggested by the cranky Mr. Kroll of The Bronx, New York. In response to Serling’s defense against his sarcastic post card, Martin Kroll (he signed his full name this time) had written back with a very intelligent observation. After thanking Serling for telling him of his struggles with the “Noon” script, he persists in disagreeing with him on his main contention, to the effect that in writing it he had taken the best of a stringently limited set of alternatives:

You say that it is better to get something said than keep your principle and have nothing said. I believe you oversimpl[i]fy the case. There are numerous examples of television plays and motion picture scripts which deal with the indecency and injustice of mob violence and collusion that have come before the public. As an example may I cite *The Oxbow Incident*. The treatment was general and non-controversial, and yet it was a fine contribution as a drama and as a social document.<sup>35</sup>

Kroll is accusing Serling of having committed the fallacy of “false dichotomy”: if he can’t treat the contemporary problem of lynching by depicting lynching as it exists today, he can only treat it by presenting a watered-down, compromised depiction of what happens today, as he did in the “Noon” script. There is a third possibility: your treatment of the contemporary problem can be, to use Kroll’s word, “general.” This strategy, I take it, would mean presenting an image of a concrete, specific event in such a way that it presents the universal principles and ideas that these events illustrate: and doing so *in order to* present these principles and ideas.

Obviously, it was precisely this third route that Serling took in the “Dust” version of the Till story and later, brilliantly, in *The Twilight Zone*. He took it, not so much out of an inner artistic compulsion as much as as a way of responding to extrinsic circumstances. It was a way to evade the would-be censors and controversy-averse corporate cowards. As J. M. Coetzee pointed out a few years ago, censorship has always tended

to prompt writers to express themselves in “allegorical modes, Aesopian language” and “implicit references.”<sup>36</sup> As an attempt to evade censorship, the *Twilight Zone* strategy proved to be a great success. It is a curious fact, but undeniably true, that the same racists and segregationists who will write angry letters and organize boycotts if you produce a Realistic show that depicts the lynching of Emmett Till as a despicable atrocity, will be completely indifferent to a fantastic, allegorical show that says that *all* lynchings are despicable atrocities.

Beyond that, it is obvious to us now, as Serling probably eventually realized, that the allegorical or Aesopian mode he adopted in *The Twilight Zone* was not a dilution of his material at all. On this issue it is interesting to note that when, in 1998, “A Town Has Turned to Dust” was filmed for the Science Fiction Channel, the producers moved the tale from the 1870s to the distant, post-apocalyptic future, in which all of planet earth is a drought-parched desert and social conditions are those of the Wild West at its most anarchic. In other words, they moved it even further from the facts of the actual case that inspired it. And yet the effect is hardly one of dilution. Though the film is dedicated to the memory of Emmett Till, the remoteness of the film’s setting serves, naturally enough, to emphasize the universality of its implications.

The emergence of the Rod Serling who created *The Twilight Zone* is a rather odd case of artistic evolution. He changed, rather abruptly and driven by the pressure of circumstance, from an artist who thought it was his highest calling to comment on the problems of the day by depicting them directly, to one who commented on principles and universals involved, not merely in the problems of the moment, but of human life itself. In so doing, he became just the sort of author who deserves the sort of treatment he is given in the essays in this volume. For to move from the concrete issues of the day to the principles that underlie them is to move from a journalistic approach to these problems to a philosophical one. Though concrete events, such as the Till case, can have philosophical interest or relevance, that is because they can illustrate, illuminate, or raise issues about general ideas and principles. One is not practicing philosophy until one is dealing with those ideas and principles themselves.

## NOTES

1. The statement is from the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s *Film Art: An Introduction*, quoted in Berys Gaut, “Film

## THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

- Authorship and Collaboration,” in Richard Allen and Murray Smith’s *Film Theory and Philosophy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 169 fn. 1.
2. More recently, *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), created and dominated by writer David Chase, has brought this tradition back to life, at least for the length of eight years.
  3. First, a brief comment on the nature of the approach I will take. Serling’s career can easily be seen as a series of battles. His practice and convictions often put him at odds with others – with sponsors, with the advertising agencies who represented them, and with the network officials who usually took their side in a dispute – and he argued vigorously for his point of view. He was also a prolific raconteur and self-explainer who sometimes carried out his battles in the public press. To date, the published accounts of his career generally simply repeat his accounts as the unvarnished truth. This I think is a serious mistake. It is like basing a history of a war entirely on the propaganda statements of one of the combatants. In what follows I will, whenever I can, check Serling’s self-explanations against other sources, and put them into context. The point of course is not to impugn his integrity. The point is that the purpose of my statements, made so long after the battles have been fought and their issues settled, is simply to achieve insight. The point of *his* statements was that of every act committed by a combatant: to win.
  4. Rod Serling, *Patterns: Four Television Plays with the Author’s Personal Commentaries* (New York: Bantam, 1958; orig. pub. Simon and Schuster, 1956), pp. 6 & 7. In what follows, details about Serling’s life and career for which I cite no other source will be from the introductory essay in this book, “About Writing for Television.”
  5. See note 3 above.
  6. As Noël Carroll has pointed out to me, there is another connection between *The Twilight Zone* and the radio medium. There had been several radio anthology series that involved horror or supernatural elements, including *Inner Sanctum*, *One Step Beyond*, and Arch Oboler’s *Lights Out*. Serling was known to be a fan of *Lights Out*. He was also a great admirer of Norman Corwin, whose anthology series often involved fantasy elements.
  7. Ayn Rand, “What is Romanticism?” originally published June 1969, reprinted in *The Romantic Manifesto, Revised Edition* (New York: Signet, 1975), p. 121.
  8. I use these terms as follows. A Realist is someone who aims for a certain aesthetic effect: namely, the impression of reality as it actually exists, non-idealized. A Naturalist is a Realist whose work conveys a belief in Fatalism, the notion that human choice counts for little because people are ruled by natural, historical, or economic forces that are beyond their control. John dos Passos was a Realist and Emile Zola was a Naturalist. Since Serling was

LESTER H. HUNT

never a fatalist, I regard his early work as Realist in my sense, and not as Naturalist.

9. This at any rate is what Joel Engel says in his biography, *Rod Serling: The Dreams and Nightmares of Life in the Twilight Zone* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), pp. 84–6. Engel does not cite any source for this account, but it is certainly consistent with the style and content of Serling's early writing. In general, Engel's book is unfortunately not very reliable. See notes 10 and 16, below.
10. Rod Serling, in the CBS interview with Mike Wallace, September 22, 1959. The interview is presented entire in *The Twilight Zone Definitive Edition* DVD set, Season 2.
11. Joel Engel repeats as factual Serling's claim, misleading at best, that the Senate debates in "The Arena" are, in Engel's wording, "an incoherent mishmash, and cryptographic jumble," in *Rod Serling: The Dreams and Nightmares of Life in the Twilight Zone*, p. 125.
12. "The Arena," script marked "Second Revised Script," p. 46. Throughout the present essay, all the Serling correspondence and unpublished screenplays I quote or paraphrase are in the Serling papers in the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, Wisconsin.
13. *Patterns*, p. 20.
14. *Patterns*, *ibid.* Except where indicated, my account of the evolution of the "Noon" teleplay follows Serling's in the *Patterns* book.
15. This is how Serling later told the story in a panel discussion at Santa Barbara's Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. *The Relation of the Writer to Television: A Center Occasional Paper*, Introduction by Marya Mannes (New York: Fund for the Republic, 1960), p. 11.
16. Letter from Serling to Kaufman, dated April 8.
17. Joel Engel erroneously reports that Serling did make that change. *Rod Serling*, p. 125.
18. Max Youngstein of United wrote back that "while I think it has many wonderful ideas in it, there is just too much talk, talk, talk in it as it stands to make it a full length feature picture." Letter to Serling dated April 16, 1956.
19. This at any rate is how Serling describes the critical reaction to the show in a letter to Junes Eddy, an Ohio friend of his, dated May 11, 1956.
20. Postcard dated April 26, 1956.
21. Letter of May 12, 1956.
22. *Patterns*, p. 22.
23. "Noon on Doomsday," draft marked "REHEARSAL SCRIPT 4/4/56," Act III, p. 15.
24. Letter of June 12, 1956.
25. "Noon on Doomsday," theatrical version, revised draft, Act II, p. 5.
26. "A Town Has Turned to Dust," script marked "revise as of 5/26/58," p. 112.

## THE AUTHOR AS AUTEUR

27. "A Town Has Turned to Dust," p. 117.
28. Jack Gould, review of June 20, 1958. Text available on the website of the Rod Serling Memorial Foundation, <http://www.rodserling.com/NYTtowndust.htm>.
29. *Cincinnati Post*, May 23, 1958. This is the date that Gordon F. Sander gives for this article in his *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television's Last Angry Man* (New York: Penguin USA, 1992), p. 261 n. 9, but it must be erroneous, since it would put this comment before the show's air time, an event to which it refers in the past tense.
30. "A Town Has Turned to Dust," p. 114.
31. This draft is marked "First draft as of 4-21-58" and is the only other draft of this script in the Serling papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society.
32. "Rod Serling: Submitted for Your Approval," *American Masters* series, produced for WNET, 1995.
33. See note 6 above.
34. Interview presented in "Rod Serling: Submitted for Your Approval," *American Masters* series, produced for WNET, 1995.
35. Letter of June 1, 1956.
36. J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 123. Actually, Coetzee is at this point quoting, but with approval, the words of a certain Sidney Monas.