

CHROMAKEY

THE MAGAZINE OF CULT TELEVISION

ISSUE 8 OCTOBER 2024 \$9.99CAD

SPY CRAFT

A HISTORY OF THE AVENGERS



PLUS

WHAT NEXT FOR THE X-FILES?

THE DARK SHADOWS BOOKS MYSTERY
RELIVING THE FIRST YEAR OF SURVIVORS

CHROMAKEY

THE MAGAZINE OF CULT TELEVISION

ISSUE 8
OCTOBER 2024



- 2** THE X-FILES by Greg Maughan
- 7** STAR TREK: DISCOVERY by Jon Wesley Huff
- 11** THE TWILIGHT ZONE by David Gibbons
- 14** DARK SHADOWS by Rich Handley
- 22** STAR COPS by Matthew Kresal
- 24** THE AVENGERS by David K Smith
- 34** UNDERMIND by Bob Furnell
- 36** X-MEN '97 by James Silvester
- 40** SURVIVORS by Paul Mount
Episode review by Greg Maughan
- 46** THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY by Aidan C Matear
- 48** UFO by Paul Mount
- 52** STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS by Kathleen Spoon

.....

Editors Bob Furnell & Richard Peevers **Design & Production** Paul MC Smith

Publisher Pencil Tip Publishing **Facebook** Chromakey the Magazine of Cult Television **Twitter** @ChromakeyMag
Website www.thechromakeymagazine.wordpress.com **Email** chromakeymagazine@shaw.ca "Attn: Chromakey"

CHROMAKEY is published three times a year by Pencil Tip Publishing. All material © 2024 Pencil Tip Publishing.
No content may be reproduced by any means in whole or part without the written permission of the publishers.
All letters will be considered for publication. Writers guidelines are available via email. Ad rates available on request.



I STILL WANT TO BELIEVE

With a reboot of the 1990s hit series on the horizon, GREG MAUGHAN takes a look at the original run's legacy to see which aspects might be worth preserving in a new search for the truth

A new series of *The X-Files* is on its way. Initially confirmed by Disney in 2023 after series creator Chris Carter mentioned it, possibly prematurely, during a podcast interview in May last year, a few more tantalizing details have been confirmed in the last couple of months. With *Black Panther* director Ryan Coogler at the helm, we've been promised a full reboot and a diverse cast. At this stage little else is known aside from the fact its early days for the project and we'll likely be waiting some time before we see a finished product. But that's more than enough for fans of the original series to get excited and start speculating.

At its peak, *The X-Files* was a genuine cultural phenomenon, with stars Gillian Anderson and

David Duchovny gracing the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine and viewing figures peaking in 1997 with a Stateside first broadcast audience of nearly 30 million. It also gained a dedicated cult audience with a vocal and active fanbase deeply invested in both the interpersonal character development of its leads and the increasingly convoluted twists and turns of its overarching 'myth arc'. This combination of cult fan investment and mainstream crossover appeal made the show an important stepping stone in the emergence of a renaissance in US television.

Turn of the millennium shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Lost*, *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* built on the DNA of *The X-Files*. Even if some of those shows didn't share its sci-fi

trappings, the audience figures the programme secured were seen at the time by television executives as proof that a mainstream audience would invest in and follow a long-form and at times convoluted story told outside of the soap-opera format. As such, it comes as no surprise that Disney — which has overseen reboots and expansions of *Star Wars*, the Marvel Universe, *Doctor Who* and X-Men — should turn to that other 1990s ‘X’ franchise as it looks for the next property for its ever-expanding streaming service. With a guaranteed fanbase and a bingeable back catalogue that many hold a deep nostalgia for, it almost seemed only a matter of time until the show was rebooted.

As someone who watched the original run on first broadcast and remembers the nightmares it gave me, I’m extremely excited to see what the new show offers. But I also wonder how well some of the key features of the show will translate to current times. Or, perhaps more interestingly, how Coogler will adapt or ignore these features.

I loved *The X-Files*. As a child obsessed with the paranormal, the occult, cryptids, aliens and monsters, it was perfect for me. It fed my imagination and was an entry into many subjects that still fascinate. As well as being a springboard for further viewing and reading, I’ve rewatched the whole run on VHS, DVD and most recently via streaming, first on Amazon Prime and then again on Disney as the rights changed hands in the run-up to the reboot. However, unlike other archive shows that I’ve been able to rewatch and enjoy with fairly straightforward nostalgia, each rewatch has left me more critical of the show. There are very few episodes of *The X-Files* that offer a simple, warm nostalgia. As a cultural artifact of the 1990s, watched now it seems, well, off in many ways. Let’s take a look at a few of the key characters and themes of the show and how they come up short when viewed today.

Mulder

Fox Mulder, driven to the point of obsession, is presented as a heroic outsider. The top of his graduating class and destined for greatness, he rejected that path to pursue a mystery that sets him against his colleagues and sees him literally banished to the basement, the FBI’s Least Wanted. Not only his career but personal relations also fall to the wayside as he continues



to plough his chosen furrow regardless of the opinions of those around him.

Key to understanding how Fox sees himself is the late-series episode ‘The Sixth Extinction II: Amor Fati’ (season 7). Here we get an extended dream sequence experienced by Mulder in a coma. The dream shows us a mundane, ‘normal’ life — a picket-fenced idyll of marriage and children that Mulder believes he could have if he abandoned his life’s work on the X-Files. Commenting on this dream, Cigarette Smoking Man tells us, “Extraordinary men are always most tempted by the most ordinary things.” Borrowing its structure from *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), the episode is supposed to highlight Mulder’s destiny and his need to accept the suffering this entails, just as Jesus had to reject his dream and accept suffering on the cross in Martin Scorsese’s controversial movie.

But I would say the episode depicts someone *refusing* to accept that they may bear some responsibility for their own failings. “If only it weren’t for this grand alien conspiracy, I would be happily married,” Mulder claims. “If only I didn’t have to fight, I would have the life I really wanted.” The fact that the show invites the viewer to compare his suffering to that of Jesus by its structural mirroring adds to the feeling that maybe, just maybe, Mulder has a slightly inflated



opinion of himself. This attitude is present throughout the series and struck me much more on each rewatch. When you combine that with his supposedly ‘cute’ pornography addiction, which is jokingly referenced throughout the series, it gives the impression that Mulder sees himself as a rather bitter Good Guy who deserves more than the world has given him. Viewed today, I’d go so far as to say Fox Mulder gives off incel vibes! In a reboot of *The X-Files*, I’d like to see a lead character relaxed enough to work more collaboratively, or someone who has a functioning life outside of their investigations and is pulled into an adventure beyond their control, rather than someone who uses that adventure to excuse their lack of a life elsewhere.

Scully

Dana Sully is the strongest character in the series. A bold statement but one I think very few fans would argue with. Yet on an episode-by-episode level there are too many instances of her making foolish decisions as shortcuts to further the plot, too many examples of her being scripted to show squeamishness despite her medical background, and too many instances of her acting passively when it always feels she should be bolder and more inclined to drive the action forward. I would argue that as scripted Scully is more often than

not a weak character and far too often falls into the passive role — getting into trouble so she can be rescued or failing to see an answer so someone else can present it to her. It becomes clear when rewatching the series that she actually acts out of character more often than she acts in accordance with how she’s usually thought of.

So why is it that she’s remembered as confident, clear-headed and strong to the point where she’s undeniably iconic? Frankly, it comes down to performance. Scully is so well remembered because of Gillian Anderson. The part was sold to Anderson as a strong female role in the vein of Jodi Foster’s Clarice in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). It’s clear from her performance that she has taken this original pitch and built on it. She seems confident and clear as to how Scully would act or respond in any given situation, and this flows through all of the decisions about her performance across the series. When Anderson has material to work with, she makes every ounce of it count. When she is, more often than not, given weaker material, she imbues what she can with strength and what she can’t with an ironic detachment. When Scully is strong, it’s so well performed that this is what the viewer recalls, to the extent that when rewatching it’s the character’s weaker moments that seem jarring, even though these are more commonplace. In a rebooted *X-Files*, I’d like to see a Scully analogue who’s actually given consistent and equal moments of strength and insight.

Conspiracy

The perception of conspiracy theories today is quite different to what it was when *The X-Files* began. Let’s take, for instance, the storyline about the polio vaccine. At the time even, this aspect of the series struck me as riffing off some slightly dodgy ideas. It tapped into fears about government tracking of individuals and also a scepticism toward Big Pharma, both of which have grown exponentially in the decades since.

However, the show’s focusing those fears on the polio vaccine, to me, felt as though it was channelling the very damaging and now thoroughly debunked real-world conspiracy theory which pointed to the MMR vaccine as a cause of autism among young people. A supposed link between the MMR vaccine and autism rumbled on throughout the 1990s. It set back the

.....

understanding of the disorder for a generation in a number of different ways, not least by framing it as an illness to be cured, or at the very least managed. It also had a quantifiable impact on the uptake of a vital childhood vaccination. We now know the theory was based on bad data from research papers that have since been withdrawn, but the ripples of this conspiracy theory were felt for some time after. Yet this seemed to the series' writing team to be a relatively uncontroversial theory to extrapolate and explore a version of within their myth arc. Imagine a similar storyline now, post-covid. Is there any way our heroes could unproblematically question the legitimacy of a life-saving vaccine? I don't believe there is. The same is true of the general perception of conspiracism. In the early 1990s, Mulder could be presented as a patriot speaking out so the truth could be heard. But what are the images that this immediately conjures up today?

We're left with two possible paths for a rebooted *X-Files*. One is to drop the thread of government cover-ups and conspiracies altogether and concentrate on the monster-of-the-week stories. These included some fantastic examples of more ironic and self-aware investigations. But not all of them were light and jokey. Take the episodes 'Tooms' (1.21) or 'Beyond the Sea' (1.13), both of which are notable examples of televisual horror. If this is the route Coogler takes, I'm sure it'll be a fun and interesting show. However, the other more difficult and perhaps more rewarding path would be to think about how conspiracism could be presented in a compelling story without our lead characters coming off as QAnon-lite.

There are recent quantifiable examples of real-world corruption that could act be taken as inspiration: the Flint water crisis, for example. Could a setup like this act as the starting point for a tight conspiratorial story arc where investigators are drawn into an ever-tightening pursuit of the truth, with science-fiction aspects revealed as

they get deeper into their scrutiny? With conspiracy in the mainstream now so clearly a short-hand for Right Wing Conspiracism and (dare I say it) Fake News, I would like to see a diverse reboot of *The X-Files* go one step further and fly the flag for Left ing Conspiracism. Maybe that's too much to expect from the House of Mouse and I should just be content with compelling monster-of-the-week episodes. But I think there's the potential to do so much more.

The Comeback

Of course, we have had a more recent return to *The X-Files* to consider, which might give us some idea of where a reboot could go. Following the low-key success of the second *X-Files* movie in 2008, many of the original cast and production team returned for two short series in 2016 and 2018. The second movie played out as an extended monster-of-the-week episode, relatively divorced from the density of the myth arc that the series bowed out with in 2002, whereas the



2016 season sought to pick up where the original run had left off. I believe this led to alienating a potential new audience while confusing a lapsed audience that in many cases had forgotten the finer details of the myth a c's twists and turns. This definitely suggests a reboot would benefit from a clear break from the past.

If the original myth arc is to be invoked, I'd suggest looking to the Robert Harris novel *Fatherland* or the 2022 Netflix series *Archive 81*. In these, we follow a character in an act of discovery. For an *X-Files* reboot, Mulder and Scully's basement office could be tuned to for documents that shed light on a new case, and the elements of the myth arc that the series wants to highlight and investigate could be discovered by the viewer in unison with the characters. This would be in stark contrast to the 2016 season, where foreknowledge was assumed, to the detriment of the show.

Lessons were learned to some extent with the 2018 season, where the show's mythic elements were concentrated within the episodes 'My Struggle III' and 'My Struggle IV'. It makes these

opening and closing installments borderline unwatchable but saves the episodes between from what at this stage had become a dead weight for the show. However, I'd like to see a reboot negotiate the intrigue of an over-arching plot alongside and within more standalone episodes with a lighter touch, rather than dropping this aspect of the show altogether or relegating it to info-dump myth arc episodes as the original run would do on occasion.

Despite focusing on negatives that have stood out to me from the original run, I have a great affection for the show. I do find it interesting how much some of these negatives jump out at me now, and wonder what it says about how the world has changed, and how I've changed, since watching it in my childhood. But I think that's a good thing to ponder. I also think that as a premise and a set of iconography, there are plenty of fun and interesting things to do with the property. So like many other fans, confirmation of a Coogler-led reboot fills me with excitement that the truth is still out there, even if this time around it will likely be a vastly different truth. ●





As the starship Discovery completes its voyages, JON WESLEY HUFF recalls a troubled but ultimately triumphant endeavour to bring the Star Trek franchise firm into the modern era of television

" *Last time then. Let's fly.*
 With those words, Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green) brought five seasons of *Star Trek: Discovery* to a close. To long-time *Star Trek* fans, it probably feels like it wasn't enough. Five seasons is more than respectable for streaming series these days, when even popular shows are ending three or four seasons in. The days of seven-year runs for *Star Trek* may be over for good, with the truncated run of *Star Trek: Enterprise* no longer feeling like an outlier. *Discovery* premiered on September 24, 2017 and over six and a half years and five seasons produced 65 episodes. Compare that to the 98 episodes of *Enterprise* over its four-year run and it's easy to understand why it would feel like the show ended too soon.

Discovery had perhaps the most fractious genesis of any *Trek* series. Devised by Bryan Fuller and Alex Kurtzman, differences in creative direction and Fuller's commitment to *American Gods* (which he would end up exiting after the first season) led to CBS asking him to step down as *Discovery's* showrunner. He eventually left the series altogether and only some of his ideas were used in the first season. It's tempting to wonder if the off-balance feel of the first few episodes was because of this, but in retrospect it all seems very much by design.

The show attempted to drag *Star Trek* into the 21st century of television. The result was a mixed bag. *Discovery* exhibited the signs of growing pains that nearly every *Trek* series since the original has experienced. But it premiered in a

crowded and more unforgiving television landscape, with per-episode price tags that would have been a dream come true to those making the 1990s series. Eschewing the typical ensemble crew, *Discovery* was hyper-focused on Michael Burnham and her journey from first officer t traitor and back again. The only other key characters were Saru (Doug Jones) and Captain Lorca (Jason Isaacs), with Stamets (Anthony Rapp), Culber (Wilson Cruz) and Tilly (Mary Wiseman) rounding out the main cast in more supporting roles. To emphasize how little the rest of the bridge crew mattered to the big picture, *Trek* novel writer Dayton Ward got to name the

some vocal fans wanted one thing and the creators seemed intent on giving them something else. Namely new main characters. Sometimes this worked out well. The introduction of Booker (David Ajala) as a more spiritual version of Han Solo was welcomed. The introduction of Adira (Blu del Barrio) and Gray (Ian Alexander) fizzled out thanks to some weak writing and acting. However, those characters are representative of *Discovery*'s admirable attempt to incorporate more LGBTQIA+ characters after the 1990s shows tap-danced around the issue. It was simply the execution that was rocky. Adira having to correct Stamets' use of their pronouns is the



crew of the Shenzhou because they weren't identified in the script. So Detmer is Detmer thanks to the author of a tie-in.

Fans rebelled against this, to an extent, and their cries to know and see more of Detmer, Owosekun, Linus and the others were mostly ignored. There were a few awkward attempts at having these characters spout their backstories, but in the end very little of substance was done with the characters. Even mini-arcs like Detmer's distrust and hatred for Michael were largely forgotten or fizzled out. Part of the reason for this might be because these actors weren't cast with the intention of being main characters. They were initially more like supporting artists with dialogue.

This created a strange sort of tension where

earnest but clunky modern analog of Tasha's conversation with Wesley about drugs in *The Next Generation*. The creators' hearts were in the right place, but it's a good example of one of *Discovery*'s great weaknesses. Sometimes the writing just wasn't up to the task, veering toward embarrassingly on-the-nose or poorly thought-out.

The show did have some amazing guest stars and recurring characters, however. Getting Michelle Yeoh as Captain Georgiou was a definite feather in the franchise's cap, and keeping her in the mix after Georgiou's untimely (and gruesome) death via her Mirror Universe counterpart was smart. Jayne Brook was also fantastic as the much-missed Admiral Cornwell. Captain Pike (Anson Mount) and Spock (Ethan Peck) nearly

overwhelmed the excellent season two, so it's no surprise they were rocketed into what has so far been the best modern live-action Trek show, *Strange New Worlds*. In more recent seasons, recurring characters like Admiral Vance (Oded Fehr), President Rillak (Chelah Horsdal), Jet Reno (Tig Notaro) and President T'Rina (Tara Rosling) have all added tension and laughs to offset the regular crew.

History will decide, ultimately, what *Discovery's* place in the Star Trek mythos will be. For a time it seemed as though it was leading the charge toward a bright Trek future. Certainly CBS felt the excitement around the series as it tried, once again, to launch a new venture (CBS All Access) with its reliable-but-neglected television franchise. The opening two episodes were tough to wrap one's head around if one was used to Star Trek as it had been. Some fans never really got over it or didn't bother to continue watching. The sales of *Discovery* merchandise were unfortunately weak. But that didn't stop them from launching *Star Trek: Lower Decks*, *Star Trek: Picard*, *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, *Star Trek: Prodigy* and various *Short Treks* in its wake. Of those, only *Strange New Worlds* is confirmed to make it into 2025. Among more corporate reshuffling and possible sales, the future seems less assured if no less bright, with the Starfleet Academy series (starring Holly Hunter, with Paul Giamatti recurring) and the Section 31 movie still to come.

Future proven

What can't be denied is the success of *Discovery* in launching Star Trek into the 21st century. Even with all its bumps and bruises, if it had been a disaster it wouldn't have lasted five seasons, and it certainly wouldn't have a spin-off. It showed that Star Trek can work for modern audiences, even if all the experiments it did with the format, like moving away from the ensemble and episodic storytelling, aren't repeated. Going through the process of trying out these things — more swearing, modern production techniques — helped solidify what works and what doesn't. The fact that *Strange New Worlds* seemed so perfect right out of the gate (a rarity in the universe of Trek) can in no small part be attributed to some of the lessons learned from *Discovery*.

It would be a mistake (and a disservice) to think of *Discovery* as simply a strange little experiment.

When it was firing on all cylinders, it did a great job of communicating the wonder and dread of space travel that could sometimes feel a little sanded down in past Treks. The series finale, 'Life, Itself', is a great example of the show's use of big sci-fi concepts in the realization of the world beyond the Progenitor's portal. It's a strong ending to a somewhat strange and disjointed season. *Discovery* was also the most emotional of the Trek shows. For some viewers this was a turn-off, but for others it helped them connect with the characters more deeply in a relatively short amount of time.

From its rotating captains of the first couple of seasons, to the decision to transition from a prequel series to a sequel series thanks to a literal time jump at the end of season 2, *Discovery* wasn't afraid of taking big risks. That this was mixed with some bland storytelling, such as the final season's overly familiar quest storyline or the slightly repetitive 'dangerous anomaly' storylines for seasons two and three, came to feel like one of the show's quirks. It's hard to know, from the outside, what goes on with the writing of these shows and how many external factors are at play. Certainly the absence of Owosekune, Detmer and Saru in the final season (one of its major drawbacks in my view) was prompted by production realities. At the same time, as viewers we can only judge the results and how well the writers rolled with the punches.

The loss of these three characters was painful and undermined some of the 'we are a family' storytelling at play. When the replacement crew who sat at conn and ops would glance at each other, like Owosekune and Detmer used to, it felt strange. It's a small detail, sure, but those glances always felt like character choices. To reduce them to something any pair of people on the bridge would do felt like a slap in the face to characters the audience had become fond of, even if the writers always kept them in the periphery.

Balancing this out somewhat was the introduction of Commander Rayner (Callum Keith Rennie). The writers had no idea this would be the final season, so it would be interesting to know what the intention had been for the character moving forward. It certainly seems Saru would be out permanently as first officer, perhaps only appearing occasionally if at all. In this light, Rayner's introduction makes sense, especially as

it was a result at least partly of Doug Jones's schedule promoting *Hocus Pocus 2*. However, having a new character take up so much screen time in the final season is difficult to accept especially as it comes at a detriment to pretty much every character (well, those still left on the ship) except Michael. Stamets is barely given any kind of story other than being vaguely worried about his scientific legacy after the spore drive is scuttled. In fact, all the story arcs for the other crew are vague and half-baked. Culber has a brush with spirituality; Adira gets a little more confident (again); and Tilly has a teaching problem. I'm sure in the writer's minds, after Rayner was introduced, these characters could have had stronger arcs in a future season. As it is, there's a sadness that Paramount+ couldn't have done a television movie finale to give everyone a proper send-off. And it adds to the frustration of how much time was spent with Moll and L'ak, two characters the writers tried very hard to make interesting but just never really came to life, even with the former having a (tenuous, under-developed) connection with Booker.

Final goodbyes

Although the audience didn't get a movie wrap-up, at least Paramount+ had the decency to bring most of the cast back to film a coda. This has its positives and negatives, and therefore feels so very *Discovery*. In it, we get to see Burnham as an admiral (in very effective old-age makeup) and get a sense of her life with Booker. She even has a son in Starfleet. It's fitting, if a little disappointing, that the coda is entirely focused on Michael, with the rest of the cast only appearing in a sort of fantasy sequence where they all get to

be back on the bridge and hug. I doubt the show's detractors will think much of this sequence, but it seemed appropriate for the show. The one difficulty here is that Wilson Cruz was unable to do the additional filming owing to commitments to another project. Stamets and Culber are both kept fuzzy and in the distance for most of this sequence, to hide that the latter is played by a stand-in. At one point Burnham goes up to him (clearly not Cruz) and it cuts to a shot from a past episode. They tried, and only had what they could work with, but it's still an odd note.

The plot for the coda is simple. Burnham is transporting the *Discovery* on her final journey. This is another possible source of contention. The final moments of *Discovery* are basically devoted to making the continuity work with the *Short Trek* 'Calypso'. The reason for the *Discovery* being reverted to its pre-time-jump form and piloted to a certain place is hand-waved away as another Red Directive, probably from Kovich (David Cronenberg) if he's still around. How successful this is for the viewer is likely connected to how invested in 'Calypso' they were. As the *Discovery*, with only Michael aboard, slowly slips out of space dock and past a procession of ships (mostly shuttles, weirdly, with the larger, sculptural 32nd-century ships in the distance), I felt dueling emotions. On the one hand, it was a grand farewell to the *Discovery*; seeing the ship's spore drive one more time was a fitting end. On the other, Burnham taking off to its resting place without the rest of her family felt haunting and lonely, even if she does get a brief fantasy reunion with them. The benefit is that it leaves the fates of most of the *Discovery* crew open for appearances in its second spin-off, *Starfleet Academy*. ●





EVERYTHING FADES

DAVID GIBBONS highlights a haunting instalment of the classic cult anthology series *The Twilight Zone*, 'And When the Sky Was Opened'

WHEN POSED WITH THE challenge of discussing one of my favourite episodes of sci-fi/cult television, I definitely had to pause for more than several moments. There are so many fantastic television series with so many fantastic episodes. I could list ten or twenty examples of the genre that comfortably fit into the territory of 'masterpiece'. So I asked myself: when I think about what turned me into a fan of horror/sci-fi/speculative fiction, what keeps coming back to me? Even this question has multiple players: *Doctor Who*, *Red Dwarf*, *The X-Files*, *Twin Peaks* — all have moments that astonish me with their brilliance. But what I found when I sifted

through my many memories was that I continue to cherish my childhood viewing of re-runs of Rod Serling's spectacular and groundbreaking juggernaut CBS production of *The Twilight Zone*. Maybe it's because it connects me with my deceased father, but the grip of nostalgia continues to elicit a strong emotional bond between me and this program.

It's hard to articulate how influential *The Twilight Zone* was for science fiction at the time of its 1959 premiere. Although the genre had been growing since the days of Jules Verne and HG Wells, evolving quickly as the technology of the 20th century changed the world, sci-fi had yet to anchor

itself to the zeitgeist of true popularity among the masses. Within the structure and exploration of *The Twilight Zone*, Rod Serling would challenge the preconception that science fiction only targeted impressionable young boys and experimental academic writers. Defiantly, he deftly turned his premise into a must-watch half-hour of prime entertainment that grew to 156 episodes and multiple reboots through the decades. Through this Emmy Award-winning potent mixture of surrealism, horror and atmospheric dread, *The Twilight Zone* would influence countless

descendants/rip-offs, change the landscape of television, and hook millions of viewers into the immense appeal of speculative genres. There are countless examples within this powerhouse television serial that demonstrate its excellence, but one episode in particular continues to roll around my mind as a truly epic and sophisticated balance of narrative mastery, poignant social reflection, and terrific television. (Needless to say, there shall be spoilers here on out.)

'And When the Sky Was Opened' is a very loose adaptation of Richard Matheson's short story 'Disappearing Act', in which a writer finds himself gradually erased from his world. Serling elects to set a version of the tale against the pillar of a small group of US Air Force pilots who, having safely crash-landed an experimental spaceplane, the X-20, find themselves victims of this nihilistic fate.

To summarize, Lieutenant-Colonel Clegg Forbes (Rod Taylor) barges into the hospital room of his co-pilot, William Gart (Jim Hutton), and is desperately afraid. The world has no memory of the third man involved with the flight, Colonel Ed Harrington (Charles Aidman) — the man's entire existence has been erased. Forbes is further distraught when Gart also has no memory of Harrington. He recounts the events of the previous night: he and Harrington go to a local diner for a beer to celebrate their safe landing and new status as celebrities. A wave of fear overwhelms Harrington and he states that he feels as if he doesn't belong here any more. After dropping his beer due to this rush of terror, he goes to phone his parents for some comfort but finds they've never heard of him. After this startling revelation,

Forbes is shocked to find that Harrington is gone. No one in the diner has any memory of him; even the newspaper photograph of the three astronauts has changed to show only Gart and Forbes. He frantically leaves the diner, confused and frightened. After a brief interaction with his fiancée — where she doubles down on there never having been a Colonel Warrington — the action returns to the hospital room the next day, and Forbes' anxiety reaches its climax as his reflection in the mirror disappears. Moments later the man is gone and Gart is left as the only person with memories of Forbes. Furthermore, he's burdened with the horrible truth that he'll be winked out of existence next. As the episode ends, all three men are erased from history, as well as the experimental aircraft. Serling leaves us with no explanations, only the warning that if we're to speak of the X-20, do so with a whisper.



As simple as this little vignette appears, there's a lot going on. In fact, it's the concise simplicity of the episodes of *The Twilight Zone* that makes these 25-minute narratives so effective. Nothing is wasted over the brisk pace of the story. Every single moment builds on the tightly coiled unravelling of events. The economy of filmmaking in this story is particularly effective. Every moment builds on the existential dread that these men must be feeling, with sublimely lean performances from all three main actors. Aidman is especially effective in the aftermath of his devastating phone call with his parents. There's almost a calmness to his terror, as if he fully understands what's about to happen and is resigned to his expulsion from reality. The hospital scenes capitalize on the foil between the sterile safety of a medical environment and the impending doom that the viewers know is inevitable for our protagonists. From the first minutes of the episode, we can sense that it won't end well. The pilots' terror is also juxtaposed by the genteel politeness of the rural American surroundings. All the familiar things these men come to trust carry no protection against this unknown menace.

As viewers we're given everything we need, and yet nothing. What on Earth happened up above the world to cause this horrible punishment for these good men? Often in these serials, bad people get what's coming to them, but here we witness the unfair demise of pilots of great merit. These are men with families, who legitimately enjoy each other's company, and who feel a sense of pride in working for their country. Were they supposed to die in the crash, and death is catching up with them?

Did they witness something so dangerous in the sky that the Universe itself has no choice but to remove them from existence? What exactly is the X-20? Has the government somehow found a way to permanently silence potential leaks from revealing their state secrets? We don't know the answer to any of these questions, nor are we given any clues, but we do know that the punishment being dealt to these men is utterly horrifying and probably unfair. The whole scenario is a narrative masterpiece.

What sets this episode as one of the truly best of *The Twilight Zone* is all the thematic exploration going on just underneath the surface. The narrative has its finger on the pulse of society on several profound levels. Firstly, potential space travel is absolutely mesmerizing to the general public in 1959. It has only been a few years since the world dared challenge the limits of the sky. It's still nearly a decade before there will be humans on the moon. To the amateur public, virtually nothing is known about orbits, atmospheric barriers or the dangers of space. Standing right beside the excitement of exploring our aviation limitations is the daunting knowledge that we really don't know what's going on up there. What are the consequences of veering too close to space? The episode grips onto that fear of the unknown and drives home that paranoia.

Beyond that, due to the ongoing conflict of the Cold War, America has begun to have questions about what its government is doing with its experimental research. Since the nuclear bombs dropped during the Second World War, never has the secretive agenda of the government been closer to the minds



of the general population. What power does the military complex wield when the veil is lifted? The fact that the X-20 disappears from reality alludes to the possibility that the aircraft itself is too dangerous for mankind to possess. Technology is breaking boundaries; perhaps these are boundaries that should not be tested.

Unbelonging

As if these topics aren't interesting enough, 'And When the Sky Was Opened' brings one other complex exploration to the table: post-traumatic stress disorder. Ultimately, behind all of its twists of reality-bending existentialism, this episode foregrounds the struggles that the military human sometimes endures when rejoining society after their work is done representing their country. One of the most common symptoms of PTSD is the feeling that one no longer belongs in the world, and that fear is exactly what these men display. Forbes and Harrington find themselves in the bar and, despite their celebrity status and free benefits, Harrington can't connect with his environment any more. He reaches out to his parents but is unable to communicate with them — that simple pleasure has been stolen from him. Eventually, the world

forgets about him. Forbes is despondent that Harrington has been forgotten; he's simply another soldier who has been tossed away when his service has ended. Forbes tries to express himself to his girlfriend; she doesn't understand — no one can. Whatever happens in the skies or the seas or on the land for these people changes them, changes how they're perceived, changes how they perceive the world around them, changes their personal relationships. Soldiers with PTSD come back to a world where they feel they've been erased and where all the characteristics that once felt secure now feel dangerous, like some inevitably bleak reality is surging to some kind of unfathomable closure. That Serling can cram so much depth into short-form television is remarkable.

Over its five seasons, *The Twilight Zone* is brimming with ingenious examples of short fiction that dare tread the skies and dark corners of the unknown. 'And When the Sky Was Opened' is a tremendous starting point for new viewers, and if you're a veteran of the series but haven't given it a watch in some time, take a look at these brilliant gems. The landscape of televised sci-fi owes much to Serling's tour de force. ●