

## Networks search for sci-fi success

By Steve Weinstein  
Entertainment News Service

**A** 60-YEAR-old woman is implanted with an alien seedling. When she gives birth, the infant is offered up to the Eternal — a hideous, tentacled, pulsating monster straight out of a child's worst nightmare.

A human cop meets, dates and copulates with his neighbor, an attractive female scientist from outer space who is endowed with a bald, leopard-spotted head and some peculiar erogenous zones.

A physicist whose experiments have gone just a little haywire can be found leaping back through time to assume the identities of a gorgeous woman, an elderly black man, a baby and maybe even a dog.

Science fiction is alive and well — and outrageous and creepy — on television this season. Aliens from the planet Morthral are vying to take over Earth in the second season of Paramount's syndicated *War of the Worlds*. An entire community of some 250,000 bald-headed "newcomers" from the planet Tencore are intermingling with the human population of Los Angeles in Fox's new series *Alien Nation*. A perplexed scientist and his mischievous hologram sidekick are traveling through time and swapping identities in NBC's *Quantum Leap*. And with the U.S.S. *Enterprise* continuing to encounter out-of-this-world adventures on Star Trek: *The Next Generation*, sci-fi buffs won't have much time for their usual dose of Heinlein, Asimov and Bradbury.

But while pleasing hard-core sci-fi fans is essential to the success of these series, the trick for TV programmers is to make science fiction appealing to the mass audience as well.

### Last place

Over the past 25 years, that hasn't been easy. Recreating the magic of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*, which wasn't exactly a huge ratings smash itself during its six-year run in the early '60s has been virtually impossible.

Witness NBC. Brandon Tartikoff has guided the network from an almost-dead, last-place standing to a commanding first in the prime-time ratings during his nearly 10 years as president of the network's entertainment division. His knack for ordering and scheduling programs that lasso the loyalties of the Nielsen families has been uncanny. Except when it comes to science fiction.

Throughout Tartikoff's reign, NBC has repeatedly tried and repeatedly failed to score with a sci-fi or fantasy series. Neither *Voyag-*

ers, the powers of Matthew Star, *Misfits of Science*, *Manimal*, *Amazing Stories* nor Alfred Hitchcock Presents lasted more than two seasons. Even the network's two blockbuster sci-fi mini-series, *V* and *Something Is Out There*, flopped as weekly series.

"I came to Brandon with the idea for *Quantum Leap*," said Donald Bellisario, the show's creator and executive producer, "and he was definitely reticent to give it a try. He said, 'science fiction just doesn't work.' Different is OK, but science fiction is a four-letter word."

Unabashedly science-fiction shows such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *War of the Worlds* have flourished in syndication the past couple of years with a smallish (by network standards) audience of hard-core fans. But not a single science fiction/fantasy show has clicked on any of the networks since *The Incredible Hulk* was cancelled in 1982 after a four-year run on CBS and *The Bionic Woman* and *The Six Million Dollar*

*'You have to capture their minds'*

Man enjoyed their modestly successful runs on ABC in the mid '70s.

Over the past two decades, a period in which sci-fi movies such as the *Star Wars* trilogy, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.* were shattering box-office records, the networks were churning out such sci-fi flops as *Battlestar Galactica*, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, *Project UFO*, *Man From Atlantis*, *Starman* and *Max Headroom*. In the '60s, neither *The Invaders* nor *The Time Tunnel* could survive past their first year. *Outer Limits* lasted only a year and a half and even the original *Star Trek* wasn't anything close to a hit during its three seasons on NBC.

"It's part of the history of the sci-fi and alien form," said Warren Littlefield, NBC's executive vice-president of prime-time programs. "You go all the way back to *The Invaders* on ABC, which started out great and then faded fast. What happens ultimately is the audience asks for a resolution. Is it going to be us or them? Who's going to win? They get frustrated sitting week after week without getting to the final battle."

"With the mini-series *Something*

*Is Out There*, it was really scary and we had great monsters and the audience responded to that. But when we got into the weekly grind of series television, we couldn't deliver that kind of scary stuff and great monsters every time."

So why, in the face of so much failure, do the networks keep trying?

"It's not as if we walk around here with a sci-fi stamp and say, 'Where is it, we've got to have it,'" Littlefield said when pressed about NBC's seemingly obsessive search for a science-fiction hit. "But we do walk around looking for something that's different, and when you introduce a show like *Quantum Leap* that covers new territory and the audience doesn't out-and-out reject it, that's enough for us to say, 'Let's stick with it.'"

### Endorsement

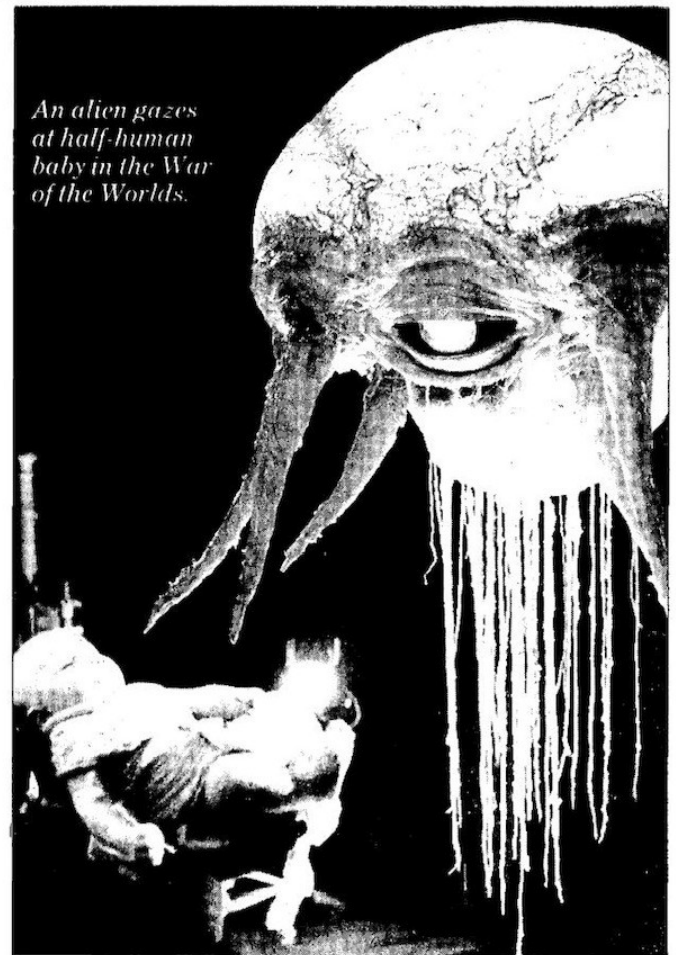
Perhaps in deference to that less-than-ringing endorsement of their genre, science-fiction TV producers such as Kenneth Johnson, executive producer of Fox's *Alien Nation* and formerly the creator of the mini-series *V* and *The Incredible Hulk*, say the secret to making a science-fiction series with mass appeal is "to completely forget about science fiction."

"Sure we want to come up with episodes and approaches that you can only see on *Alien Nation*, but they have to be driven by character and personal, moral issues rather than driven by externals," Johnson said. "Battlestar Galactica became mostly shots of space ships flying around and eventually people said, 'Haven't I seen that already?' And when they turned *V* into a weekly series, it became dependent on action and special effects, whereas the mini-series was really an allegory about power and how different people react to it. Conversely, the series was all about, 'Well, last week Diana ate a guinea pig, what can we have her eat this week?'"

### Weirdness

"The reason *Star Trek* has been so successful is that people know that when they tune in, it is going to be about something. With science fiction, as with everything else, you have to capture their minds more than just dazzle their eyes."

So while syndicated series such as *War of the Worlds* flaunt their traditional sci-fi aliens and monsters, today's network shows downplay their sci-fi weirdness. *Alien Nation*, Johnson maintained, is not about aliens from outer space. It is instead a giant allegory about the integration of an outsider race of people into mainstream society. It is an exploration of the prejudice



*An alien gazes at half-human baby in the War of the Worlds.*

encountered by any group — the Jews and Italians at the turn of the century, blacks in the '50s and '60s, the Vietnamese boat people today — as they search for acceptance from the majority.

### Realism

True, the aliens look strange, they get drunk on "sour milk" rather than sour mash, they can see in the dark and they have two hearts and some bizarre reproductive requirements, but all those physical differences, Johnson insists, only make it easier for the audience to swallow strong statements about bigotry and the moral necessity of accepting others.

Likewise, Bellisario, whose show

recently began its first full season on NBC after an abbreviated, mid-season run earlier this year, has limited the time-travel element of *Quantum Leap* to the span of the main character's lifetime — this in an effort to bring as much realism to the show as possible. *The Time Tunnel* in 1966 sent its two scientists to the siege of Troy, the battle of Jericho and the home of Marie Antoinette, but Bellisario's scientist pops in and out of only the past four decades, and he never gets involved in any major historical events.

"What makes this interesting from week to week is if you get involved with this character," Bellisario said, "and it's hard to do

that if you're bouncing around with the lions and the Christians in ancient Rome. You suspend belief so much (in that kind of series) that it becomes an unrealistic kind of show."

To enhance the realism of the program and to acclimate the audience to the idea of "quantum leaping," the first few shows of the new season will see the physicist, played by Scott Bakula, assuming the identity of men around his own age.

On the other hand, *War of the Worlds*, is weird, scary and impelled by the age-old battle of good against evil — exactly the kind of thing you think of when you hear the words science fiction.

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