

The Max Headroom Project: A Manifesto, of Sorts

James Gifford, August 2005

It is in no way unreasonable to ask why anyone would plan a documentary* project about a brief 1980s media phenomenon. I'm not sure I have an answer that will stand close examination, but let me try. Understand, too, that I am writing this in some degree of ignorance, having only misty notions of the continent I've set out to explore – the outlines seem clear and the major features well-marked, but that mountain range over there may well turn out to be a dragon's tail. Let's go see.

Then...

Max Headroom was a phenomenon, no question about it - but a brief phenomenon, and one as inextricably tied to its era as "I Love Lucy" and "The Brady Bunch" were to theirs. Max Headroom is, though, a phenomenon that transcended the barriers of mere television, became one of the most recognizable and imitated characterizations in TV history, and did more to blur the line between reality and fiction, between reality and television, than almost any other fictive creation in modern times.**

For a while, Max was ev-ev-everywhere. The television series. The US talk show. Imported glimpses of the British talk show.*** TV specials. The cover of *Newsweek*. And, of course, one of the biggest and most radical advertising campaigns in history. (Which failed; people did c-c-catch the wave, but soon let it go, too.) And parodies... endless parodies. "Alfred E. Headroom" on the cover of MAD Magazine. The bickering Reagan and Khomeini Max-heads in "Back to the Future II." Comic routines ("What does Linda Lovelace have?") Political cartoons (Ronald Reagan appearing in "Doonesbury" as "Ron Headrest.") The image of a clever, stuffed-shirt, er-er-erratically speaking fake person was easily imitated and seemingly irresistible.

But the image of someone behind the curtain, behind the glass wall (real or figurative) and with access to the secret levers of power and control – and to the secrets lurking there – was even more intriguing. One of the keys to Max's popularity and success was that it poked fun at and asked hard questions of its own buoying medium. "Laugh-In" (1968) was perhaps the first to turn the mirror around on TV, followed shortly after its cancellation in 1973 by "Saturday Night Live." There were others; the deadly "Second City TV" (1976), the short-lived "Fridays" (1980) and, much later, "MAD TV" (1995) continued the tradition. But Max Headroom was the first prime-time offering to make vicious fun of ratings, advertising, producers's perceptions of viewers as stupid sheep – gleefully exposing things that were both true and secret.

* In the scholarly sense, not the film or television sense.

** Sherlock Holmes may be Max's only genuine predecessor in this respect. Matt Frewer, of course, went on to play Holmes in several UK telefilms.

*** Note that I write from an unavoidably US-ian viewpoint, although I'm fully aware of Max's UK-ian origins.

(In some ways, Max's most direct antecedent in this respect may have been "Turn-On," an *uber*-Laugh-In take that was so beyond the tame limits of its time that it ran less than one episode on 5 February 1969. ABC cancelled the program after this one episode; many affiliates reportedly switched to alternate programming *during* the show. One has to wonder about the decision-making connections between this show, Max, and ABC...)

In the end, that very viciousness may have been Max's downfall. At first lauded for permitting such self-savagery, ABC seems to have gotten very uncomfortable with having its Orwellian innards exposed and advertisers mocked every week.* And Max was, above all, an intelligent show aimed at intelligent viewers. Perhaps there just weren't enough of those among the sheep. Perhaps there never have been. Despite flashes to the contrary, television is not the province of intelligent entertainment; unalloyed wit and intelligence have always been a millstone to shows' ratings.

The other millstone Max found himself chained to was the "New Coke" campaign. Huge, expensive, flashy, attention-getting and aimed directly at Max's core market, the campaign and product's implosion in just a few months may have accelerated Max's decline as a pop icon.**

Later...

Max Headroom didn't really have a "later." His run went from the Channel Four telefilm in early 1985 to the cancellation of the US series in October of 1987. The last installment of the story appears to have been the UK Christmas (pardon me, Xmas) special in 1989, but even that came nearly a year after the last significant Max appearance. The series took almost ten years to reach reruns, on the Bravo, SciFi and TechTV cable/satellite channels – just one of many delicious ironies in the Max saga. This almost certainly has less to do with its content than the fact that very short series had no syndication market until the appearance of specialty cable channels – 100 episodes that could be "stripped" five nights a week for a season was the usual minimum. There are also ownership and licensing problems in that the original telefilm and the series were owned by different entities, and in that the series became something of a lost orphan when the production company, Lorimar, was absorbed by Warner Brothers in 1993.

The TechTV appearance in 2002 was accompanied by great hype and fanfare, and indeed, most present web references trace back to either the TechTV or G4TV sites. There were interviews with the cast, much rejoicing among Max fans... and then again the blackness of the void, as Max Headroom has not been seen on TV screens since.***

* The two most famous and savage commercial-break lead-ins by Max were in the second and fifth episodes broadcast; there were none – at least, none this sharp – later.

** Controversial in its day, the entire "New Coke" launch is still seen as a fiasco of Edsellian proportions. A more recent conspiracy-theorist view is that "New Coke" was never intended to succeed, but was a ploy to get all old, sugar-based Coke off the shelves before bringing it back with a high-fructose base. Switching directly would have been more noticeable, or so the theorists claim. Who knows?

*** Excepting on the screens of those who taped one television run or another, or those scurrilous cyberpunkies who have bought one or another of the bootleg DVD sets so readily available on the net. I can't help but think Max would approve, no matter how much it might irritate the show's owners.

Mostly, Max Headroom (as both icon and shows) has moldered on the back shelves and in cult fandom, neither quite lost and forgotten nor as popular as the kitsch of other eras. Max seems tailor-made for the era of the Internet, but it hasn't really happened. Oh, you'll get hits when you search – Googling on “max headroom” generates about 235,000 hits. But sites worth more than a moment's perusal are few and scattered. (And I note that Googling “Brady Bunch” produces 2.2 million hits; “I Love Lucy,” about 2.4 million.)

Most of the existing Max sites are casual fan sites that list much the same material – one-paragraph summaries of the episodes that appear to trace to a common source, and a few other comments or connections. Most live on the student and alumni trees of .edu domains or “freeweb” sites and appear to be long abandoned and not updated for many years. It would seem Max was too new to be truly kitschy, and too old to be cool... and so the net, a place he should have flourished, has largely passed him by.

I do detect traces of more substantial web sites that have apparently come and gone, but that they are only traces, and are gone, only confirms what I've said. One of the most substantial sites was the one that lived at this domain address (www.MaxHeadroom.com) until around 2002... but even the dedicated fan who created that site eventually folded up the tent and moved on.

Now...

The odd thing is that everyone – at least, everyone over 20 or so – knows who Max Headroom is. Even those who have only the faintest impression have a good handle on Max-as-icon.

True story: in my preparatory research for this project I had the opportunity to ask an acquaintance, an academic with good standing in formal popular culture studies, if anyone in PCA/ACA* had done any writing on Max Headroom. She replied in the negative, and noted that she hadn't been allowed to watch the show as a young teenager, had never seen it, didn't know much about it.

Her email to me was subject-lined: “About M-M-Max.” *Her* line, not mine.

So: Max Headroom. Impact in its era? Huge. Lingering impact? Diluted but present. Overall importance? In my opinion, unquestionable. ***I think Max Headroom is a cultural icon and an element of popular history worth noting, preserving and examining at a high, even professional level.***

And so far, there has been little note and no preservation. The originators, owners and studios have left Max behind, although there are periodic rumbles of interest. There are no books, other than the two connected ones from the original era. Published articles and papers are scanty and nonexistent after 1990. And if there has ever been a complete, detailed web site, it's gone now.** All that remains are the aforementioned fan site, on

* Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. (www.h-net.org/~pcaaca/)

** By far the most complete site I've found was the one that existed at this address from about 1997–2002. The proprietor eventually took it down rather than have it “rot” as un-maintained sites will.

which the useful, valid information would fit into a couple of typed pages and the misinformation, blather and detritus would fill a goodly book.

The world of Max Headroom today pretty much resembles the “Fringes” in the show... a vast wasteland with a few scattered points of value, but populated by skulking, shadowy figures. (When I figure out which, between Art and Reality, is imitating which here, I’ll let you know.)

The Max Headroom Project

I was a fan of the series in its day and thought fondly of it for years, making periodic attempts to locate it on the air or on tape, and occasionally browsing for what I could find. My periodic curiosity got the better of me recently, and after I acquired... well, I would never buy a set of pirate DVDs, you understand, but... you see, I’ve just had a very interesting reacquaintance with Max, his friends and his cockeyed world.

In following up this time, I found myself annoyed at searching site after site and finding only tedious, brief, well-worn and often erroneous information. Not that there aren’t a few golden nuggets out there, but if I want to sift through that much sand, I can more profitably go up the road to the California gold country.

My first thought was that it was a shame that there isn’t a huge, detailed, complete web site I could go browse whenever my c-c-curiosity struck. My second thought, around three in the morning, was that it would be fun to put one together. My third thought, in the cold light of day and after sufficient coffee, was... but I’m getting ahead of myself.

Science fiction writer Spider Robinson claims his literary career started when, annoyed at a published story, he declaimed, “By God, I can write better than this turnip!” I don’t fault any of the fans who have put up Max sites – it’s time-consuming to dig up the information and put it in web form – but, by all that’s holy,* the time has come for a truly substantial documentation of all that was and is Max; an assemblage that collects, corrects and presents everything there is to say and show about this strange and wonderful pseudoperson.

In the immortal words of Dean Vernon Wormer, “...and that foot is *me!*”

I believe that I’m a pretty good candidate to come along and be Max’s... biographer? Or would it be telebiographer? I am a researcher and writer by trade; a graphic, publication and web designer by experience; and an audio and video engineer by chance. And I’m an old-time Max fan. I have both the fannish fascination and the skillset needed to sift a pile of complex video, audio, web and human-memory data to extract and organize the good stuff.

By way of some background, I’ve spent much of the last ten years on a similar project. Always a fan and student of science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein, I became dismayed at the low and poor level of documentation and understanding of his work. In the early 1990s, I began a research, documentation and writing program that culminated in a 300-page book, ***Robert A. Heinlein: A Reader’s Companion***, the first truly comprehensive and

* Ratings, of course.

fully verified annotated bibliography and survey of Heinlein’s work. Published in 2000 and taking a close second in the contests for the Hugo and Locus awards the next year, it has become a foundational document for a new generation of Heinlein studies. A companion website, *site:RAH* (www.nitrosyncretic.com/rah/), is the number one site for online information about Heinlein and his work.*

I have accomplished all I set out to do with respect to Heinlein – much more, really – and I have for some time been gracefully fading from the field. The Heinlein work has turned out to be a good run-up for a project that really interests me – one that dwarfs the first and could well occupy me for the rest of my professional life. It will be a similar documentation and “resurrection” of a major literary and historical figure who, like Heinlein and somewhat like Max, has been pigeonholed and largely forgotten for his real accomplishments. The centerpiece of the effort will be a vast and costly publishing project.

Before I turn to that life project, though, I have to clear the decks and make preparations – connections, research links, family arrangements. I have some remaining Heinlein tasks to complete as well. In between phasing down one large effort and ramping up another, there is time in my professional schedule for something on a modest scale. Something like... Max Headroom.

The plan is still vague and will depend on what sources, resources and breaks come my way. However, the very firm plan for Phase I is to create a web site that fully, even exhaustively documents everything there is to know about Max – all the shows, all the development history, and all the sidelights, all the cultural, societal, literary and entertainment impact.

A sidelight of Phase I is to provide a new hub on the web for the Max fans and friends that are out there, the ones who perform several hundred search-engine seeks a day looking for “max headroom” information. A locus for the community would be a nice legacy, as well as a final, complete set of verified information so that the misinformation, disinformation and missing information no longer controls the field. Who knows: someone might get really serious about Max in five years, ten years, longer. It’s my intention to make the information as useful and available then as it will be very shortly; the Max site will be as “rot-proof” as I can make it.

(And if some agitation for a studio DVD release with all the good old stuff and the proper amount of new material comes about because of this site, so much the better.)

Phase II, on the “perhaps” list, would be to reach out for new material, to interview the developers, cast and crew of the shows and extract the background and untold stories.

Phase III... well, let’s stop there for now.

The one thing I’m short on (as always) is time. This is being written after the first hard running start at the project, and lemme tell you, it’s been tough. There’s not much to start with except the shows themselves; reliable information is hard to come by. Even the mighty Internet Movie Database (IMDb) is woefully short on data and sprinkled with outright errors. So it’s more like hunting dinosaur bones than anything I would have expected. Even

* I’m also involved with the 2007 Heinlein Centennial efforts (www.HeinlenCentennial.com), which will likely be my swan song with the Heinlein world.

the Heinlein project, which involved years of patient research and accumulation, seems easy from this perspective.

Part of what's making this job so large and tedious is that I'm a dedicated compleatist; it's important to me to get every detail, and get every detail right. Others have been happy to list only the named and featured cast, while I've been patiently digging out all the listed players and trying to match them up to IMDb and other cross-references. The same is true of every other area of documenting Max and his world.

Why? Because it's how I do things. Because a small detail about a minor character or plot element might make the difference for one person sifting through the material to answer a question. Because you never know what might be important to someone analyzing 80s cultural influences in twenty or fifty years.

Because, dammit, it's how such things should be done.

For me, halfway, mostly and good enough... isn't.

Although I wonder if even Max would think it a little silly.

(All I can say to those who occasionally peer over my shoulder and sigh at what I'm working on is... Th-Th-Th-Thanks. Thanks.)

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